FROM LIBERALISM TO NEO-ORTHODOXY:
THE HISTORY OF A THEOLOGICAL TRANSITION, 1925-1935

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PRECIS

FROM LIBERALISM TO NEO-ORTHODOXY: THE HISTORY OF A THEOLOGICAL TRANSITION, 1925-1935

This thesis is an examination of the shift from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy which occurred in American Protestant thought from 1925-1935. Religious liberalism was a multifarious movement which can be traced to the irenic mid-nineteenth century writings of Horace Bushnell. Its proponents generally assumed the immanence or indwelling of God in man and nature, expressed confidence in the goodness and improvability of human nature, employed advanced views in Biblical criticism, and adopted a sympathetic stance toward modern secular culture. Although squeezed into a somewhat defensive centrist position by religious humanism on the left and by fundamentalism on the right, liberalism was the most dynamic religious force in this country during the first quarter of the twentieth century. During the late twenties, however, the confidence and vitality of liberalism began to dissipate, and by the early thirties, its leaders were lamenting the decline and even the collapse of the liberal system.

American neo-orthodoxy was the religious movement which moved into the vacuum created by the disintegration of liberalism. Spawned within the liberal movement, neo-orthodoxy, in many respects, bore the liberal stamp. It appropriated liberalism's social emphasis, as well as its modern Biblical scholarship. Essentially, however, neo-orthodoxy was a liberal heresy. In a direct and deliberate manner, it repudiated much of its liberal heritage and adopted "antidotes" to the essential motifs of liberal theology. Rejecting immanentism, neo-orthodoxy stressed the transcendence or otherness of God. Reacting against an optimistic interpretation of human nature, neo-orthodoxy emphasized man as sinner, incapable of bettering his lot without God's grace. And disillusioned with cultural adaptationism, neo-orthodoxy proclaimed that the church must stand apart from and challenge culture.

Eight men played significant roles as formulators of neo-orthodox thought---Walter Marshall Horton, Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, Elmer G. Homrighausen, Edwin Lewis, Walter Lowrie and George W. Richards. Each was a former liberal who "converted" to the new movement during the early thirties. While other thinkers certainly contributed to the rise of American neo-orthodoxy, these eight theologians and churchmen represented the strength and core of the nascent movement.

The transition from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy was encouraged by various social and intellectual forces. On the one hand, crisis events like World War I and the Great Depression jolted liberalism into a more realistic and pessimistic understanding of the human situation. On the other hand, the Continental "theology of crisis" had a decisive impact upon the tone of liberal thought. Together these external influences exacerbated the "internal critique" of liberalism, an on-going process of self-adjustment which had long been promoting a movement in the direction of greater and greater moral realism. Thus, neo-orthodoxy began as a revolt within liberalism which, under the sway of crisis events and crisis theology, burgeoned into a full-fledged religious movement during the early 1930's.

To

BETTY LOU

PREFACE

A significant shift occurred in American religious thought from 1925-1935. During this period, liberal Protestantism, the dominant theological force in this country for more than a quarter century, underwent a process of disintegration and was succeeded by a movement which has come to be known as American neo-orthodoxy.

The term "neo-orthodoxy," like most terms which designate historical movements, is somewhat misleading. The new leading edge of American theology had been nurtured within the liberal system. Its formulators were self-conscious liberals who, under the sway of crisis events and European crisis theology, became increasingly disenchanted with the reigning assumptions of liberalism. While they did reappropriate a number of pre-liberal motifs, the converts to the nascent movement did not really advocate a new form of orthodoxy. Considering these facts, perhaps a more accurate label would have been "neo-liberalism" rather than "neo-orthodoxy," for it was more truly a liberal heresy than it was a repristination of orthodoxy. Despite its somewhat misleading connotations, however, "neo-orthodoxy" has gained more currency than any other label. Therefore, rather than champion a more precise and accurate term, I have chosen to identify "neo-orthodoxy" with the distinctive theological movement which burgeoned during the early thirties.

In general, American neo-orthodoxy has received little attention from religious historians. While liberalism has stimulated a number of recent studies,[1] neo-orthodoxy has essentially been neglected. With the exception of George Hammar's Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology (1940), written from a Barthian perspective and bias,[2] no comprehensive interpretation of the neo-orthodox movement has been published to date. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, to be sure, has produced a number of critical assessments of neo-orthodoxy, but they have all come in the form of tantalizing articles and essays rather than full-length studies.[3] Therefore, since no definitive interpretations have appeared, this thesis begins at the beginning, with an examination of the transition from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy.

The history of any religious movement is, at least in part, the story of its major spokesmen. There were eight prominent formulators of American neo-orthodoxy---Walter Marshall Horton, Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, Elmer G. Homrighausen, Edwin Lewis, Walter Lowrie, and George W. Richards. While other figures certainly contributed to the emergence of the movement, these churchmen and theologians represented the essential core of nascent neo-orthodoxy.

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[1] See, for example, Kenneth Cauthen, The Impact of American Religious Liberalism, New York: Harper and Row, 1962; Lloyd J. Averill, American Theology in the Liberal Tradition, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967; and William R. Hutchison, "The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism," typed manuscript, 1974.

[2] George Hammar, Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology, Uppsala, Sweden: A.-B. Lundequistska, 1940. As an observer from Europe, it was Hammar's opinion that few American theologians were true Christian realists, at least in the strict Barthian sense.

[3] Ahlstrom's incisive interpretations of neo-orthodoxy have appeared in various forums over the past two decades. See his "Neo-Orthodoxy Demythologized," The Christian Century, 74 (May 22, 1957), pp. 649-51; "Continental Influence on American Christian Thought Since World War I," Church History, 27 (Sept., 1958), pp. 256-72; "Theology and the Present-Day Revival," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 332 (Nov., 1960), pp. 20-36; "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., The Shaping of American Religion (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 309-17; "Introduction" to Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967), pp. 77-84; and A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 932-48. In none of these assessments, however, has Ahlstrom focused specifically on the emergence of neo-orthodoxy.

It is my hope that this introductory study might stimulate future interpretations of American neo-orthodoxy. My adventure into unexplored territory has been exciting but far too lonely. Those who follow may dispute the path which I have cleared through this historical wilderness, but at least they will know that someone has been there before.

The writing of this dissertation has been facilitated by the kind assistance of many persons. I should like to express appreciation to Elmer G. Homrighausen and Wilhelm Pauck for their personal accounts of the neo-orthodox movement; Mrs. H. Richard Niebuhr and Richard R. Niebuhr for permission to examine and cite the unpublished papers of H. Richard Niebuhr; Mrs. Reinhold Niebuhr for directing me to her husband's writings; Mrs. Walter Lowrie for allowing me to see her husband's papers in Firestone Library, Princeton University; George H. Bricker for making available the Richards Papers in the Library of the Historical Society of the Reformed Church in the United States, Lancaster Theological Seminary; Lawrence D. McIntosh for permitting me to examine the Lewis Papers in Rose Library, Drew University; and W. E. Bigglestone and Gertrude Jacob for assisting my research of the Horton Papers in the Oberlin College Archives. I am especially indebted to my thesis advisor, William R. Hutchison, an incisive critic and constant source of encouragement; Grace Friend Mullen, an exceptional typist; Joyce Koop and my father, Wallace C. Voskuil, who spent many tedious hours proof-reading; and most of all, my wife, Betty Lou---typist, proof-reader and critic---whose sustaining love made the completion of this dissertation possible.

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CHAPTER I

THE LIBERAL HERITAGE

The American neo-orthodox movement began as an internal critique of religious liberalism, the dominant theological force in this country during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early exponents of neo-orthodoxy were bona fide former liberals who initially intended to register self-critical protests against many of the major motifs of liberal theology. What began as an internal critique, however, soon became a full-fledged schism as these disgruntled liberals developed theological positions which were virtually antithetical to those of religious liberalism. A stirring revolt was instigated in which the reigning assumptions of the liberal movement were rejected by its obstreperous offspring.

Since it constituted a ringing rejection of liberal principles, American neo-orthodoxy can accurately be described as a critical post-liberal theological movement. This does not mean, however, that the influence which liberal theology had upon neo-orthodoxy should be discounted or played down. On the contrary, the nascent movement developed an almost parasitic dependence upon liberalism. After all, liberal theology became the focus and the foil for the neo-orthodox protest. Further, the imprint which liberalism left upon America's first generation of neo-orthodox thinkers was deep and lasting. Even while they reacted vigorously, sometimes vehemently, against the theology which had nurtured them, they constantly affirmed a great residue of liberal thought. Liberalism supplied both the positive and the negative stimuli for the neo-orthodox movement. Therefore, any serious study of American neo-orthodoxy must begin with an examination of its liberal heritage.

The Roots of American Religious Liberalism

American religious liberalism[1] was a late blooming counterpart to the movement of European Protestant liberalism which flourished from the beginning of the nineteenth century through the first quarter of the twentieth. Not until the late 1870's did the liberal movement begin to blossom in this country, and not until the early 1930's did it begin to disintegrate. Despite its belated appearance, however, the roots of American religious liberalism extended far beneath the religious soil of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Liberal tendencies, for instance, can be detected in seventeenth-century Puritanism, or dissenters therefrom, as well as in eighteenth-century Arminianism, espoused by Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew. Liberal impulses have always lurked beneath the surface of the reigning Protestant orthodoxies in this country. In spite of such tendencies, however, liberalism did not coagulate as a viable religious movement until a decade after the Civil War. Only then did it become a strong, cohesive, and positive religious force rather than a dissenting impulse.[2]

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[1] Throughout this thesis, the phrase, "American religious liberalism," specifically denotes the Protestant liberal movement which burgeoned between the 1870's and the 1930's. There were, of course, other liberal movements, such as Arminianism, Unitarianism and Universalism, which emerged in this country long before the Civil War.

[2] For a concise survey of post-Civil War religious liberalism, see William R. Hutchison, "Introduction," American Protestant Thought: The Liberal Era (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 1-14.

While it is possible to trace the ancestry of American religious liberalism (also known as progressive orthodoxy, modernism, the new theology, and the new orthodoxy) back to wayward Puritans, dissenting Arminians and other indigenous liberals, the most important progenitors of the movement were a group of European philosophers and theologians who dominated nineteenth-century thought. Directly or indirectly, the promulgators of liberal Protestantism in America were influenced by the exponents of liberal Protestantism in Europe. Such diverse intellectual giants as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, F. D. Maurice, Frederick Robertson, Albrecht Ritschl, R. H. Lotze, Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack left their marks upon liberal theology in America.

As much as European intellectual currents may have influenced American religious liberalism, the movement was not merely a "backwoods" variety of the European original. America generated and nourished its own somewhat peculiar brand of liberal thought. The major impetus toward liberalism occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century when the superstructure of Calvinism, so meticulously constructed by Jonathan Edwards, finally collapsed under its own weight. For nearly fifty years, America experienced a prolonged theological hiatus, during which evangelical revivalism and Unitarianism (both precursors of the late nineteenth-century liberal movement) attempted to gain control of Christian America. Finally, when the revivals cooled and Unitarianism failed to catch on outside the environs of Boston, liberalism was prepared to fill the intellectual vacuum created by the collapse of the "One-Hoss-Shay."[3]

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[3] In a delightful poem, Oliver Wendell Holmes used the metaphor of a deteriorating "one-hoss-shay," to describe the collapse of the Calvinist system in America: "How it went to pieces all at once,---All at once, and nothing first,---Just as bubbles do when they burst." Holmes, "The Deacon's Masterpiece: Or the Wonderful 'One-Hoss-Shay'," in The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1858), p. 298.

The forefather as well as forerunner of religious liberalism in America was Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), the brilliant pastor, theologian and teacher from New Haven who died just before liberalism embarked upon its Golden Age. Bushnell was a transitional theologian whose writings provided many future liberals with a secure bridge from the old to the new orthodoxy. His irenic mid-nineteenth-century mind effectively blended congregational orthodoxy with a mild mixture of romantic and rationalistic philosophies.

Initiated by a myriad of intellectual stimulants then, liberalism emerged as a positive and vital theological movement during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It was a fortuitous era for the promulgation of liberal ideas. The theories of evolution were gaining respectability; the infallible Bible was being battered by the Higher Critics; the republic was in the midst of unprecedented industrial expansion and industrial growth. It was a time which demanded new modes of thought, new perceptions of reality.

Religious liberalism gradually began to capture Protestant America. At first, only a relatively few theologians and pastors were attracted to the movement. These intellectuals were able to secure control of a few of the major seminaries and religious periodicals only after a number of sustained struggles. At the turn of the century, however, liberalism began to attract grassroots support in the churches, and by the early twenties it was so deeply entrenched among the Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Northern Baptists, Methodists and Disciples that it was able to withstand a withering counterattack by the fundamentalists. While it is difficult to gauge exact popular support, between 1900 and 1930 liberalism was certainly the most powerful and successful theological force in America.

The Common Creed of American Religious Liberalism

Interpreters of American religious liberalism have been unable to reach a binding consensus as to essential motifs of liberal theology. Like other "movements" in our religious history (i.e., transcendentalism, fundamentalism, and neo-orthodoxy), liberalism seems to defy easy analysis and simple definition. It is not surprising, therefore, that recent historians have rendered diverse judgments about the theological nexus of the liberal movement. One interpreter, Kenneth Cauthen, isolates three developmental motifs---continuity, autonomy, and dynamism---to serve as the formative principles for liberal theology. He claims, furthermore, that these motifs are most clearly perceived in the emphasis which liberal theologians placed, respectively, upon the immanence of God, the centrality of religious experience, and the evolution of nature and history.[4] A more inclusive definition of liberalism is offered by Lloyd Averill who lists as many as twelve major propositions adumbrated by liberal theologians. Averill's definitional profile deals with everything from ethics to eschatology.[5] William Hutchison, on the other hand, isolates a single motif, the modernist impulse, as the dominant and distinctive feature of the liberal movement after 1870. He maintains that the common bond for all religious liberals was an unabashed willingness, on what were taken to be adequate theological grounds, to accommodate the Christian faith to modern culture.[6]

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[4] Kenneth Cauthen, The Impact of American Religious Liberalism (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 3-25.

[5] Lloyd J. Averill, American Theology in the Liberal Tradition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 69-94.

These differing interpretations of the essence of liberal theology can be attributed to a number of factors. First, and perhaps most importantly, American religious liberalism was, by nature, non-exclusive and comprehensive, open to all who shared in the liberal spirit. In part, the inclusiveness of the movement can be attributed to its diverse intellectual roots. Various strains of thought, emanating from Europe and America, were ultimately blended into its theological mix. Second, the promulgators of liberalism wrote so prolifically for such a long period of time that it is difficult to digest their major writings and circumscribe the essential features of their thought. An overwhelming stream of liberal books and articles flowed from publishing houses between the 1870's and the 1930's.[7] Third, it is hazardous to interpret liberalism because no prominent or normative figure emerged inexorably from the history of the era to serve as an archetypal thinker. One acute observer of the movement notes that historical concentration upon individuals is essentially precluded because of "the wide dispersion of liberal leadership, and the absence of outstandingly influential American liberal theologians."[8] Fourth, liberalism is difficult to circumscribe because there was never a formal "school" of liberal thought to serve as an infallible guidepost for historians. The movement was simply too comprehensive and long-lasting to develop a single definitive school of thought.

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[6] William R. Hutchison, "Introduction," The Liberal Era, pp. 4-6; and "The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism" (typed manuscript, 1974), pp. 1-11.

[7] George A. Gordon, for example, produced 12 books, just above the average for liberal theologians, and at least 100 other separate publications. See Hutchhison, "The Modernist Impulse," footnote 3, p. 394.

[8] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 776.

The historiography of American religious liberalism reveals little clear-cut agreement as to the true nexus of liberal theology. This does not mean, however, that liberalism was a nebulous and amorphous movement which emerged haphazardly without intellectual focus or direction. The theologians of the liberal era were fully aware that they were working within the framework of a common cluster of theological assumptions. The titles of their works indicate that they self-consciously formulated a new set of theological principles. Theirs, after all, was a new theology, a new orthodoxy, a progressive orthodoxy, a present-day theology.[9] Despite interpretative roadblocks then, it is correct to assume with Sydney Ahlstrom that liberalism was "a positive and structured movement, not merely a vague tendency, or an indefinite state of mind." It developed "a fairly definite doctrinal content."[10]

Liberal theologians assumed the immanence or indwelling of God in man and nature, expressed confidence in the goodness and improvability of man, and adopted a sympathetic or accommodating attitude toward modern secular culture. From the late 1870's to the early 1930's, American liberals, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, subscribed to this common creed. To be sure, there were other identifiable traits of the liberal movement such as a definite Christocentrism, a personalistic idealism, a dedicated social gospel and a radical Biblical criticism. Yet, these are peripheral motifs, much less critical for understanding the intellectual forces which motivated liberal theologians. Three tenets---God's immanence, man's goodness, and cultural adaptationism---are the most prominent and pertinent "common denominators" of liberal theology in America.

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[9] The titles of some of the most popular theological works during the liberal era reveal that the liberals were consciously forging new theological principles: Newman Smyth, Old Faiths in New Light, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879; John Bascom, The New Theology, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1891; David N. Beach, The Newer Religious Thinking, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1893; George A. Gordon, The Christ of To-day, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1895; Henry Churchill King, Reconstruction in Theology, New York: Macmillan Co., 1901.

[10] Ahlstrom, Religious History, p. 779.

American neo-orthodoxy constituted an intellectual revolt against the basic assumptions of religious liberalism. The three major motifs of liberal theology, therefore, became the essential foils for neo-orthodox thought. Since these motifs are the intellectual cornerstones of this entire study, it is important that they be thoroughly elaborated and assessed before a discussion of the neo-orthodox reaction is pursued.

American religious liberals consistently sought to modify explicit supernaturalism with a doctrine of divine immanence. They were convinced that orthodox Calvinism was grounded upon a stultifying dualism which needed to be abridged. William Adams Brown, a highly respected professor of theology at Union Seminary in New York, wrote an article in 1911, "The Old Theology and the New," which clearly differentiated the liberal doctrine of divine immanence from the orthodox doctrine of divine transcendence. The liberal conception of God's relationship to man and the world was explained:

> God is not thought of as separate from the universe, but rather as its immanent law. He is not a transcendent being living in a distant heaven. . .He is

> an ever-present spirit guiding all that happens to a wise and holy end.[11]

The liberal position was likewise underscored by Borden Parker Bowne, the famous personalist at Boston University, in a book which was boldly entitled The Immanence of God. Bowne argued that the doctrine of divine immanence was so significant because it "recalls God from the infinite distance in space and time. . .where we so often lose him, and makes him the omnipresent power by which all things exist and on which all things continually depend."[12]

The liberals based their theology upon a monistic perception of universal reality. Kierkegaard's postulation of an "infinite qualitative distinction between the temporal and the eternal," the catch phrase of the neo-orthodox movement, would have seemed absurd to the liberal mind. Orthodox distinctions between the finite and the infinite were blurred by the doctrine of divine immanence. The liberal perception of God as the indwelling spirit of the universe, or "the omnipresent ground of all finite existence and activity,"[13] signified a break with traditional dualisms.

As a result of the doctrine of divine immanence, the liberals were able to postulate a close kinship between God and man. William Newton Clarke, the first great liberal systematizer, contended that since God created man in his own image, God and man must be essentially alike, at least in matters pertaining to the mind. Using an analogy which was popular among the liberals, Clarke reasoned that man's mind was a true reflection of the creator's. "If the creation is a mirror of God, it is a mirror in which man sees his own face also."[14] The venerable theologian obviously perceived no impassable gulf between God and man. Brown, another great liberal systematizer, put it even more decisively and succinctly when he wrote that there was "nothing in God's nature which separates him from any child of man."[15]

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[11] William Adams Brown, "The Old Theology and the New," The Harvard Theological Review, 4 (January, 1911), p. 16.

[12] Borden P. Bowne, The Immanence of God (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1905), p. 151.

[13] Ibid., p. 3.

The liberals considered God to be in close union not only with his spiritual creation, but with his material creation as well. Bowne understood the doctrine of divine immanence to mean that the world of both "things and spirits, is nothing existing and acting on its own account. . . but it continuously depends upon and is ever upheld by the ever-living, ever-present, ever-working God." The natural world was never to be perceived as a rival of God, but simply "the continuous manifestation and product of the divine activity."[16]

H. Shelton Smith maintains that the liberal adoption of the doctrine of divine immanence was encouraged by three main factors. The first factor was the theory of organic evolution from which the liberals imbibed so deeply. Theological evolutionists tended to define God almost solely in terms of an inwardly energizing force or spark. The second factor was the influence of the immanentistic romantic movement. English and American transcendentalists were deeply affected by romanticism and, in turn, had a formative influence upon the theology of Horace Bushnell, the father of

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[14] William Newton Clarke, An Outline of Christian Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 191.

[15] William Adams Brown, Modern Theology and the Preaching of the Gospel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), p. 104.

[16] Bowne, Immanence, pp. 3, 27.

American religious liberalism. The third factor was personalistic idealism, which conceived God as a cosmic person as well as the immanent Spirit of the world organism.[17] Whatever combination of intellectual factors moved liberalism toward immanentism, it is beyond dispute that the doctrine was one of the basic motifs of the movement.

American neo-orthodox theologians explicitly rejected the doctrine of divine immanence. They would indict the whole liberal movement by stereotyping the liberal God as utterly immanentized and woefully anthropomorphized. Such a caricature was quite overdrawn and crude, however, as very few liberals were in danger of becoming pantheists. In their own minds, the liberals were attempting to strike a balance between immanence and transcendence, and since they were convinced that orthodoxy had assumed an overly transcendent doctrine of God, the liberal tendency was to re-emphasize the doctrine of divine immanence. William Newton Clarke, for instance, maintained that the attributes of transcendence and immanence co-existed in God and that they were interdependent. "Transcendence without immanence would give us Deism, cold and barren; immanence without transcendence would give us Pantheism, fatalistic and paralyzing."[18] Other prominent liberal theologians were similarly aware of the need to temper the contemporary tendencies toward extreme immanentism as well as extreme transcendence, and they sought to postulate balanced theologies.[19] However, taken as a whole, liberals did rely upon a fairly extreme doctrine of God's immanence. As Smith has recently written, "the idea of divine immanence became so strong that many liberals were inclined to lose sight of a truly sovereign God."[20] It was a liberal tendency which neo-orthodoxy would counteract with a vengeance.

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[17] H. Shelton Smith, "The Christocentric Liberal Tradition" in Smith, Robert T. Handy and Lefferts A. Loetscher, eds., American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation With Representative Documents, Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 258.

[18] Clarke, Outline, p. 130.

[19] See William Adams Brown, Christian Theology in Outline (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), pp. 200, 209; and Lewis French Stearns, Present Day Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), p. 206.

A second major motif of liberal theology pertained to the doctrine of man. The liberals expressed confidence in the essential goodness and improvability of human nature. In nearly every instance, man was portrayed as basically dignified, worthy and responsible.

There was a close connection between the liberal doctrine of divine immanence and the liberal doctrine of human dignity. Since the liberals maintained that God was the indwelling spirit of the universe, or in Bowne's elegant phrasing, "the omnipresent ground of all finite existence and reality," it was not unreasonable for them to conclude that God had infused man with a spark of divinity. Man's dignity was, therefore, derived from his intimate relationship with God.

While few liberals spoke of the divinity of man, many were willing to define man in terms of divine sonship. William Newton Clarke felt that man, who was created in the image of God, must be considered, in some immanent sense, a son of God. "Man came into existence in the likeness of God, as a child comes into existence in the likeness of his father." The practical effect and value of man's filial relationship to God is that spiritual intercourse is facilitated. "The invisible God and the invisible man have such community of nature that they can have communion with each other."[21] Lewis French Stearns, an important liberal who taught at Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine, also believed that man's "likeness to God" was best expressed "by the term sonship." Stearns maintained that the image of God in man "consists in his spiritual being, his free rational and moral personality, created in love and for love."[22] This liberal position was punctuated by William Adams Brown who wrote that the "doctrine of a kinship between God and man, grounded in the nature of each as free and reasonable. . .renders possible faith in man's ultimate conformity to God in character."[23]

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[20] Smith, "The Christocentric Liberal Tradition," p. 259.

The liberal conception of man in terms of divine sonship and divine image undergirded its reinterpretation of the doctrine of sin. Liberal theologians recognized the universal reality of human sinfulness, but unlike the traditionalists, they did not believe that sin had utterly destroyed the divine image in man. Thus, while most liberals were well-armed with doctrines of sin, the potent Calvinistic conceptions of original sin and total depravity were normally excluded from their arsenals.[24] Stearns summarized the basic liberal assumption in 1892 when he wrote that man continued "even in his fallen state to possess the divine image." And while this image had been marred and defaced by sin, man retained "the same godlike nature and powers which God gave him at first."[25]

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[21] Clarke, Outline, p. 192.

[22] Stearns, Present Day Theology, pp. 290-91.

[23] Brown, Christian Theology, p. 239.

[24] See H. Shelton Smith, Changing Conceptions of Original Sin (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), pp. 196-97.

[25] Stearns, Present Day Theology, pp. 291-92.

American religious liberals were undeniably infected by a strong sense of optimism concerning man's moral potential. Since man was initially endowed with a divine image and continually infused with God's immanent spirit, not even sin could keep him from progressing as a spiritual and moral being. In fact, according to William Adams Brown, sin itself was a "necessary stage in the evolution of humanity,---an essential element in God's training of mankind for higher things."[26] Like nearly every other liberal theologian, Brown had become an exponent of moral evolution. Darwin's theory of organic evolution had been transformed into a doctrine of moral progress and ethical optimism.

William Newton Clarke, normally a cautious theologian, was nonetheless confident about the gradual improvement of mankind. "Humanity certainly is by nature a slowly rising race, with a native tendency to outgrow faults." Sin might be a temporary burden or clog upon that upward tendency, but "God has certainly endowed humanity with a tendency to rise."[27] George Harris, a professor of theology at Andover Seminary in Massachusetts, wrote a book in 1896 entitled Moral Evolution which perhaps best exemplifies the liberal commitment to the doctrine of moral progress. Harris was convinced that history was a sure testimony to the gradual moral progression of the human race. The upward ascent was certainly slow and, even at times, retrogressive. Yet, man had undeniably achieved a moral gain over the centuries.

> Man has grown to be of a larger stature. Society has improved. By distant contrast, the moderns are better than the ancients. The retrospect which sobers also

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[26] Brown, Christian Theology, pp. 273-74.

[27] Clarke, Outline, p. 245.

> animates. At a slow rate indeed mankind advances, but it does advance. And so optimism is more than a hope for the future.[28]

The liberal doctrine of man, like the liberal doctrine of God, was thoroughly attacked by the proponents and formulators of American neo-orthodoxy. The theologians of the latter movement would maintain that while the liberals humanized God, they divinized man. Likewise, the liberals would be accused of positing an utterly naive conception about the nature of man, and ridiculed for possessing an "ebullient optimism" concerning the moral progress of the universe.

Neo-orthodox theologians and historians have been unduly condescending in their criticism of the liberal doctrine of man. These critics have tended to overlook explicit liberal self-criticism and self-adjustment before the 1930's. William Hutchison has demonstrated quite convincingly that the liberals were much more "realistic" about the nature of man than most neo-orthodox-tempered interpreters of the movement have imagined.[29] William Wallace Fenn and Willard Sperry, former deans of the Harvard Divinity School, and Walter Rauschenbusch, the premier theologian of the Social Gospel from Rochester, supplied the liberal movement with regular doses of cautionary pessimism. And Harry Emerson Fosdick, the illustrious liberal preacher of the first quarter of this century, lectured often on the "perils of progress" in a manner which would have done justice to Reinhold Niebuhr. Fosdick complained that the belief in inevitable progress created a "superficial, ill-considered optimism which has largely lost sight of the terrific obstacles in human nature against which any real moral advance on earth must win its way. . .the idea of progress has blanketed the sense of sin."[30]

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[28] George Harris, Moral Evolution (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1896), p. 445.

[29] See William R. Hutchison, "Liberal Protestantism and the 'End of Innocence,'" American Quarterly, 15 (Summer, 1963), pp. 126-39; and "The Modernist Impulse," pp. 201-26.

So, there was liberal self-criticism concerning the moral nature of man. The movement was not as woefully naive as neo-orthodoxy would later contend. All of this, however, does not negate the fact that the liberals consistently believed in the goodness and improvability of human nature and in the moral evolution of the human race. Self-criticism merely means that some liberal theologians were aware of the movement's rather unrestrained optimism with respect to man and his environment. The fact that self-criticism was necessary may, indeed, justify the contention that the liberal doctrine of man was unrealistic. One historian reaches this conclusion when he maintains that because of its faith in moral progress, liberalism "tended to magnify the growing goodness of man and to obscure the fundamental roots of human sinfulness."[31]

The third essential motif of American religious liberalism was its tendency to adopt a sympathetic or adaptationist stance toward secular culture. The liberals were modernists. They unabashedly appropriated the world-view and the thought-forms of modern culture. William Adams Brown laid bare this modernist bent when he interpreted liberalism as the "type of theology whose method is determined by the modern scientific movement and which is hospitable to its results." Brown proceeded to define modern science as "the movement of thought whose chief marks on the outward side are the acceptance of development as the law of the physical universe, and on the inward side the recognition of the contribution of mind to the content of knowledge." While progress and reason were the hallmarks of the modern movement, its prophets were considered to be such diverse thinkers as Copernicus, Kant and Darwin. Brown warned orthodoxy that the day had passed when Christian theology could operate within a self-circumscribed intellectual playground, for there was "a new view of the world growing up independently of the existing religion and reacting upon it."[32]

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[30] Harry Emerson Fosdick, Christianity and Progress (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1922), p. 169.

[31] Smith, Changing Conceptions, p. 197.

The theory of evolution was obviously one of the new views of the world which Brown had in mind. Darwinism had a shattering impact upon the social and intellectual life of America during the liberal period and, without doubt, it became an operative concept for American religious liberals. It has already been noted that the doctrine of "moral evolution" had a great impact upon the liberal understanding of sin. Evolutionary theories, however, had a much wider impact upon liberal thought. It was employed, for instance, as a reliable means of interpreting human origins and development. George Harris believed that evolution was important "both in the extent of its application and as readjusting and even revolutionizing long-accepted theories of man and society."[33] Lyman Abbott, the famous New York preacher and religious editor, was similarly impressed by evolutionary arguments. In an 1897 publication, The Theology of an Evolutionist, Abbott concluded that the process of history was evolutionary, for that process had been one of "continuous progressive growth, from a lower to a higher, from a simpler to a more complex organization, under the influence of resident forces, and in accordance with law." After years of systematic study, Abbott felt compelled "to accept evolution as a history of the process of life, or as 'God's way of doing things.'"[34]

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[32] Brown, "The Old Theology and the New," pp. 1, 18-19.

[33] Harris, Moral Evolution, p. 3.

The theory of evolution also influenced the liberal understanding of the Bible as "progressive revelation." While the Bible remained a primary source of inspiration and truth for most liberals, it was no longer considered to be the inerrant and unique revelation of the Christian faith. The Higher Critics had effectively knocked the infallible Bible off its high pedestal. Theodore Munger, New Haven pastor and vivid liberal spokesman, insisted as early as 1884 that the New Theology did not regard the Bible "as a magical book; it is not a diviner's rod; it is not a charmed thing of intrinsic power."[35] While the liberals disdained the notion that the Bible was closed revelation, they did believe that it was the record of a progressive revelation. Just as man was progressing morally, so too there was a concomitant progression in his understanding of God and the universe. Brown proposed, for instance, that the permanent religious significance of the Scriptures "depends upon the unity of the progressive revelation it records."[36] And Henry Ward Beecher, the famous preacher from

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[34] Lyman Abbott, The Theology of an Evolutionist (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1897), pp. 8-9.

[35] Theodore T. Munger, The Freedom of Faith (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1884), p. 17.

[36] Brown, Christian Theology, p. 51.

New York City, maintained that there was "an ascending development" in man's understanding of the word of God. "The earliest periods are very simple. Men's thought of God was very simple and uncomplex. It grew more and more complex and loftier."[37]

While all liberal theologians were not such explicit evolutionists, it is safe to conclude that liberalism as a whole was thoroughly permeated with evolutionary concepts. Evolution was "God's way of doing things!" It was also a prime example of the manner in which liberals appropriated modern modes of thought.

At least in part, liberalism's accommodation to secular culture can be traced to its doctrine of divine immanence. Since God was perceived as the indwelling spirit of the universe, the liberals were wary of making a clear-cut distinction between the sacred and the secular. This was not a wholly evil world to be reviled by Christians but a redeemable world in which God was perpetually working out his divine purposes. "The cosmic order is no rival to God," wrote Bowne, "but is simply the continuous manifestation and product of the divine activity."[38] It was only natural for the liberals to be sympathetic toward a world in which God was ever-living, ever-present and ever-working. Munger suggested that Christians embrace secular culture because he was certain that God was revealing himself "in the whole life of the world, in the processes of history, in the course of the nations, in all the ordained relations of life, in the play of every man's mind."[39]

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[37] Henry Ward Beecher, Evolution and Religion (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1885), p. 68.

[38] Bowne, Immanence, p. 27.

[39] Munger, The Freedom of Faith, p. 31.

The liberals were cultural immanentists. They were perfectly willing to accommodate theology to secular thought because, in the end, both were perceived as manifestations of the same divine will. Operating without rigid demarcations between God and man, the sacred and the secular, the eternal and the temporal, the liberals readily adapted their theological constructs to the trends of modern thought.

American neo-orthodoxy constituted a direct repudiation of such cultural adaptation. The neo-orthodox theologians thoroughly excoriated the liberals for their alleged capitulation to secularism and betrayal of the prophetic Christian gospel. Liberal theology was constantly depicted as weak, vacillating and culture-bound.

In retrospect, the liberals would have pleaded guilty to the basic charge of cultural accommodation because they almost unanimously agreed that theology should conform to the thought-forms of modern culture. William Hutchison, who defines the liberal movement by its tendency to "modernize" the Christian faith, contends that liberalism was, indeed, a conscious effort to respond to the imperatives of secularized culture. The liberals were self-professed accommodationists. To use Hutchison's terminology, they were driven by the "Modernist Impulse."[40]

Despite this fact, it is very misleading to portray the liberals as naive betrayers of the Christian faith. They did not stumble blindly unaware into the lair of secular culture, but deliberately and consciously sought to interpret the gospel in a manner which was responsive to the modern world-view. In a sense, the liberals were writing "Christian

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[40] William R. Hutchison, "The Modernist Impulse," pp. 1-11.

Apologetics," defining the faith in light of a particular culture. They were responding to the same intellectual motivations which have prompted apologists throughout the history of Christian thought. The liberals did not believe that they were emasculating the faith by adapting to modern culture. On the contrary, they were convinced that they were rescuing the faith from the arid anachronisms of Calvinist orthodoxy, distilling and preserving the essence of Christian truth for future generations of believers.

These, then, were the major motifs of American religious liberalism---the immanence of God, the dignity of man, and cultural adaptation. They comprise a common creed to which most liberals subscribed during the Golden Age of liberal theology. While these motifs were quite obviously interrelated and interdependent, each provided distinct foci for liberal theological development. Even more important for this study, however, is the fact that each of these motifs became distinct foils for the emergence of American neo-orthodox theology. The neo-orthodox thinkers would develop particular antidotes for the three prongs of the liberal creed. Divine immanence was counteracted by divine transcendence, human dignity by human depravity, and cultural adaptation by cultural resistance. Such were the theological weapons employed in the neo-orthodox revolt against liberalism which was waged in America from 1925-1935.

Religious Liberalism and the Spirit of the Age

The early exponents of American neo-orthodoxy consistently characterized liberal theology as excessively sanguine. H. Richard Niebuhr, for example, penned this cleverly sarcastic summary of the liberal faith: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."[41] This epigrammatic caricature vividly represents the harsh neo-orthodox stereotype of liberalism which persisted throughout the dismal thirties. It was quite obviously overdrawn. The liberals did not believe that man was inexorably moving toward a state of blissful perfection. They did not believe that every day in every way the world was getting better and better. Moreover, they did not believe in a wrath-less God, a sin-less man, a judgment-less kingdom or a cross-less Christ. Despite its inherent bias and historical overstatement, however, Niebuhr's epigrammatic caricature did capture the underlying mood of liberal thought. Grounded upon the theological motifs of divine immanence, human dignity and cultural adaptation, liberalism certainly radiated a buoyant spirit of hope, confidence and optimism.

The effervescent mood of liberalism was well preserved by John Wright Buckham, an early historian of the movement, when he reminisced about the state of theology in America around the turn of the century:

> For the first time in American Christianity the incarnation had been restored to its true place in theology and shed its incomparable light over the whole area of human life. The effect upon the more eager spirits in the ministry, especially upon the younger men, was electrical. It seemed to many of us who were studying theology and beginning our ministry in the eighties and nineties as if humanity were on the eve of the golden age. These were days when 'to be alive was bliss, and to be young was very heaven.'[42]

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[41] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. 193.

[42] John Wright Buckham, Progressive Religious Thought in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), pp. 316-17. Misquotation is Buckham's.

Buckham went on to relate that all of humanity seemed to radiate with the sacrificial and victorious personality of Christ. Indeed, the intimations of divine presence "seemed to be everywhere,---in a growing social idealism, in deepening missionary enterprise, in broadening Christian thought and sympathy, in increasing internationalism." The liberals were confident that they were witnessing a prelude to the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. "As the dawn of the twentieth century approached," Buckham remembered, "we felt sure that it meant the ushering in of the reign of universal brotherhood."[43]

If Buckham's generation of liberal theologians perceived the world through rose-tinted glasses, they were basically refracting the rose-tinted mood of secular American society. During the period in which religious liberalism enjoyed its ascendance, American culture, as a whole, was suffused with hope and bursting with self-confidence. Optimism was the spirit of the age! Fundamentally sympathetic to secular culture, the liberals readily absorbed the ebullient mood which pervaded nearly every aspect of life and thought in America. Harry Emerson Fosdick noted in his autobiography that optimism was "the secular spirit of the age, the conditioning mood of scientists, philosophers and poets, which colored Christian thinking." Indeed, Fosdick was so impressed by the impact which the spirit of optimism had upon liberal theology that he considered it to be "one of the major illustrations in history of the inevitable conditioning of religious thought by its social matrix."[44]

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Living of These Days: An Autobiography (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), pp. 237-38.

It would be foolhardy to attempt to demonstrate that this country experienced a sustained spasm of blissful optimism throughout every aspect of society from the 1870's to the 1920's. Like all periods of history, this one was punctuated by economic depressions, debilitating wars and social catastrophes. The literary artifacts of the era, moreover, testify to some rather sobering intellectual counter-currents. Yet, despite occasional hammerblows to America's self-confidence, the political, social, economic and intellectual histories of the period indicate that the prevalent and recurring mood was hopeful and optimistic.

The political history of the era was dominated by the powerful impulse of reform.[45] While they emerged from diverse cultural circumstances, the Populist and the Progressive movements were twin testimonies to an age of reform. The Populists, reacting against the relentless advances of industrialism and urbanism during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, sought to alter American society through agrarian reforms. Although basically anti-modern, the Populists did express great confidence in the virtue of the natural man who was uncontaminated by the evils of cities and industry.[46] Populism was a reactionary movement which, nonetheless, voiced confidence in the possibility of molding American society in an agrarian image. The Progressives, on the other hand, sought to control the "isms" of modern America through a stronger system of government. They were imbued with "a gusty, dawn-world confidence" that America could be reformed in a scientific, constitutional, efficient and moral manner.[47] The two major figures of Progressivism, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, exemplified the dominant mood of the movement. Both men were confident that the institutions of America could be made responsive to their middle-class objectives, and both were optimistic about the destiny and exportability of the American way of life.

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[45] See Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955; Eric F. Goldman, Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952; Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order, 1877-1920, New York: Hill and Wang, 1967; Samuel P. Hays, The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957; Harold U. Faulkner, Politics, Reform and Expansion, 1890-1900, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959; and Arthur S. Link, Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917, New York: Harper and Row, 1954.

[46] Hofstadter, Age of Reform, Chaps. 1-2.

The socio-economic theories of the liberal era also reflected reformist impulses. While conservative Social Darwinism claimed a potent spokesman in William Graham Sumner, most social scientists rejected evolutionary conservatism in favor of more hopeful and adaptable theories of progress. Lester Frank Ward and Richard T. Ely, for example, were willing to tamper with the delicate machinery of society because of their confidence in the malleability of the human environment.[48] Another group of social and economic thinkers were even more radical and utopian. Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd, William Dean Howells and Thorstein Veblen were a few of the "Prophetic Agitators" for social progress in America. These men of good hope shared in the vision that social institutions could be made responsive to basic human needs.[49]

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[47] Goldman, Rendezvous with Destiny, p. 64.

[48] For a solid account of America's response to Social Darwinism see Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944; revised edition, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), esp. Chaps. 4-7.

[49] See Daniel Aaron, Men of Good Hope: A Study of American Progressives, New York: Oxford University Press, 1951.

The prevailing mode of philosophy during the progressive era provided a ready-made intellectual foundation for human confidence and cosmic optimism. Most of this country's philosophers subscribed to one of the Americanized versions of German idealism which proliferated during the latter part of the nineteenth century.[50] Among the major "schools" of idealistic thought, the form of theistic personalism expounded by Borden Parker Bowne had the most explicit influence upon religious liberalism. The absolute idealism of Harvard's Josiah Royce, however, had the most profound and lasting impact upon American thought as a whole. Despite the inroads of pragmatism, it survived as a potent philosophical expression well into the first quarter of the twentieth century. American idealists generally maintained that a cosmic spirit, often designated as God, suffused the universe with unity, direction and moral purpose. Since the idealists were convinced that the world was governed by a purposive cosmic spirit, they tended to support the hopeful theories of progress which reigned during the age of reform.

World War I and the "End of American Innocence"

The buoyant mood of secular America was dramatically deflated by brutal events of the First World War. To be sure, an intellectual revolt against optimism had been fermenting beneath the placid surface of America before the war, but it was the shattering impact of the war which actually precipitated this incipient revolution.[51]

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[50] See Herbert W. Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), pp. 454-90.

[51] See Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), pp. vii-xii, 393.

The progressive impulse was definitely numbed by an intellectual backlash to the high-minded idealism which had been employed to justify America's participation in the so-called Great Crusade. John Chamberlain delivered the historical obituary for the progressive era in 1932 when he published Farewell to Reform: The Rise, Life and Decay of the Progressive Mind in America. In a spirit of sullen post-war bitterness, Chamberlain argued that the reformers had been unwilling to continue with analysis when the process of liberalism became uncomfortable. Some heroic figures like Robert LaFollette and Randolph Bourne had remained true to liberal principles when they resisted America's participation in the war, but liberals, in general, "couldn't stand the gaff." Suddenly, when America entered the war, the progressive mind ceased to be critical.

> It contented itself with following the drift of events. It took its eyes from the heritage of all past wars of history, and looked weakly to the New Jerusalem in the clouds. This war, liberalism said, would be different. And so it idealized the drift of events calling the drift decision. With what results, we know.[52]

Chamberlain accurately epitomized the sobering impact of the First World War upon the progressive mood of America. The hopeful and confident spirit of reform dissipated quickly during the post-war decade.[53] Other events, of course, contributed to the mood change of the twenties---our failure to support the League of Nations, racial riots, Red scares, economic turbulence and labor strikes. But the war was the initial and most powerful blow to the optimistic spirit which had buttressed liberal and progressive thought for nearly half a century.

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[52] John Chamberlain, Farewell to Reform: The Rise, Life and Decay of the Progressive Mind in America (New York: The John Day Co., 1932), pp. 304-305.

[53] Chamberlain's analysis was obviously overdrawn. The war did not obliterate the spirit of reform. Seeking to counter the hypothesis that the postwar decade was "made almost unique by an extraordinary reaction against idealism and reform," Arthur S. Link has argued that the progressive movement declined but did not disintegrate during the postwar decade. See Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?" The American Historical Review, 64 (July, 1959), pp. 833-51.

While the war was undoubtedly a great watershed event in the intellectual history of America, historians must be warned against overrating its actual effect upon the total American culture. The war quite obviously put a damper upon the inveterate optimism which America had inherited from the nineteenth century. It did not signal, however, a definitive "end of innocence" for every aspect of society. Just as there were emerging strains of realism in pre-war America, so there were surviving strains of optimism in post-war America. For example, the science of economics certainly exuded optimism and confidence during the prosperous period of the twenties. Mounting statistics of progress helped to inoculate the economists against the confusions and uncertainties which drove other social scientists back to their laboratories.[54] Religious liberalism can be cited as another exception to the theory that the war was a monolithic watershed event. While the mood of liberalism was sobered by the war experience, liberal theology did not actually disintegrate until the early years of the economic depression. The war, then, did not mean the end of American innocence. Rather, it signalled a beginning to the end of innocence which occurred unevenly and gradually during the twenties and the thirties.

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[54] Thomas C. Cochran, "The Social Scientists," in Robert E. Spiller and Eric Larrabee, eds., American Perspectives: The National Self-Image in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 98-103.

Post-war Religious Liberalism: Calm Before the Storm

Religious liberalism was certainly not oblivious to the chastened mood of post-war America. In fact, there is substantial evidence that liberals participated in the post-war intellectual backlash. Once the war had begun, the vast majority of liberal pastors and theologians reluctantly climbed aboard the patriotic bandwagon, generally accepting Woodrow Wilson's idealistic justification for this country's involvement. Soon after the Armistice, however, when it became apparent that the war had been a tragic mis-adventure rather than a Great Crusade to make the world safe for democracy, a surging wave of war revulsion began to sweep across liberal Protestantism. Convinced that they had been used as passive pawns of the Allied war machine, many liberals began to repent of their involvement and profess a rediscovered Christian pacifism.[55]

The war also had a sobering impact upon the ebullient mood of liberal theology. Already in 1919, John Wright Buckham was prepared to confess that the war had been a "harsh awakening" for the New Theology. It had laid bare the one undeniable weakness of the liberal movement---its excessive optimism. In a statement which prefigured John Chamberlain's later indictment of secular liberals, Buckham wrote that his generation of religious liberals had

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[55] See Ray H. Abrams, Preachers Present Arms, New York: Round Table Press, 1933; Granville Hicks, "The Parsons and the War," American Mercury, 10 (February, 1927), pp. 129-42; and Hutchison, "The Modernist Impulse," pp. 250-84. Hutchison argues that Abrams and Hicks overemphasized general clergy support for American participation, and underemphasized outright opposition, especially from the liberals. He does not deny, however, that most liberals reluctantly condoned the war after America's entry in April, 1917.

> failed to see how far many of the facts and forces of modern life are from being consonant with Christianity. Its doctrines were extensive enough in their scope but not intensive enough in their application. They did not take account of all the facts.[56]

Reinhold Niebuhr was another liberal who felt the chilling effects of the war experience. The young pastor of a German-American congregation in Detroit who had been "more than ordinarily patriotic during the war," Niebuhr confessed during the backlash days of the late twenties that the war had made him "a child of the age of disillusionment."

> When the war started I was a young man trying to be an optimist without falling into sentimentality. When it ended and the full tragedy of its fratricides had been revealed, I had become a realist trying to save myself from cynicism.[57]

Edward Steiner, a German Jew who converted to Christianity when he immigrated to America, admitted in 1928 that his faith was still "suffering from shell-shock." Before the war, Steiner had believed that America would be different from Europe---a young and redeemable Christian nation. But then Christian America entered the war and followed the beat of the military drums. Disillusioned and pessimistic about his adopted country and his adopted faith, Steiner suggested a punishment for those Christian leaders who succumbed to the patriotic propaganda. "If I were a cruel God," wrote Steiner, "and wished to punish preachers and college professors for that sin, I would compel them to read their war sermons and war lectures and warbooks once every day throughout eternity."[58]

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[56] Buckham, Progressive Religious Thought, pp. 317, 315.

[57] Reinhold Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," The Christian Century, 45 (Sept. 27, 1928), p. 1161.

[58] Edward Steiner, "What the War Did to My Mind," The Christian Century, 45 (Feb. 16, 1928), pp. 202-204.

While the war had a sobering influence upon a number of religious liberals, it would be a mistake to conclude that it was a decisive theological watershed. Actually, American religious liberalism survived the war and its aftermath relatively unscathed. This is particularly true when one considers the devastating impact of the war upon liberal Protestantism in Europe. Sydney Ahlstrom has suggested that during the twenties, American liberalism "continued to speak in the old way as if nothing much had happened. Overhead the banner of Normalcy fluttered listlessly."[59]

There seems to be ample evidence to support the notion that American religious liberalism experienced a siege of "normalcy" during the twenties---at least during the early twenties. In fact, the first half of the decade was probably the greatest period of overall power and consolidation for the liberal movement. Since more ministers were being trained at self-consciously liberal seminaries,[60] it is certain that more Protestant churches were being pulled, however reluctantly, toward the theological left. Likewise, undaunted liberal theologians continued to produce works which reflected unwavering support for the theological motifs of religious liberalism. For example, Shailer Mathews, the famed Chicago-school liberal, boldly and explicitly endorsed cultural adaptation. When he published _The Faith of Modernism_ in 1924, liberal theology was in no mood for retreat.[61]

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[59] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Continental Influence on American Christian Thought Since World War I," _Church History_, _27_ (Sept., 1958), p. 260.

[60] See Hutchison, "Introduction," _The Liberal Era_, p. 11.

[61] Shailer Mathews, _The Faith of Modernism_, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924.

There were other indications that liberalism remained vital during the immediate post-war years. While the grandiose Inter-Church World Movement proved to be a monumental disaster, other successful peacetime financial campaigns demonstrated that American Christians were still willing to translate ideals into dollars after the war. In the all-important area of religious education, liberal methodology began to have an enormous impact during the early twenties, due to the energetic leadership of Henry F. Cope and George A. Coe.[62] And although it was later deemed to be a Pyrrhic victory, Prohibition, which went into effect January 16, 1920 and lasted through the decade, must in part be considered a victory for the social gospel energies of the liberal movement.

There is no better testimony to the strength and vitality of liberalism, moreover, than the manner in which it survived the frontal attacks of fundamentalism. The fact that fundamentalists failed to capture a single major Northern denomination indicates that liberal theology had established considerable grassroots support. By 1925, the year of the infamous Scopes Trial in Tennessee, most of the battles had already been won by the liberals. While fundamentalism would continue to survive as a theological countermovement, it no longer posed a serious challenge to mainline American Protestant thought.

American religious liberalism emerged from the First World War chastened in mood, perhaps, but with heightened power, status and popularity. During the immediate post-war years, liberalism was unquestionably the dominant theological movement in this country. Exuding confidence, stability and strength, it continued to express undaunted faith in an immanent God, a worthy humanity, and a redeemable culture. The movement seemed to possess immunity from the disease of disillusionment which had infected other aspects of American culture.

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[62] See Ahlstrom, Religious History, pp. 896-99, 907.

Despite these apparent signs of good health, however, American religious liberalism was spiritually and intellectually exhausted, on the verge of a total collapse. The spell of fine weather which liberalism enjoyed during the early twenties was merely an Indian summer. The movement was actually deriving its strength and energy from a surfeit of prewar idealism and optimism. Once this reservoir of critical fuel was depleted, religious liberalism was left fully exposed to the brutal winter winds which had previously numbed the secular liberals. These winds, furthermore, spread the seeds of an incipient neo-orthodox revolt against liberal theology. The Indian summer of the liberal movement, therefore, was merely the calm before the winter storm.

CHAPTER II

THE INTERNAL CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY

Liberalism's post-war Indian summer faded quickly during the late twenties. All pretense of normalcy was shattered by a devastating "internal critique" of liberal thought which burgeoned into a full-fledged revolt during the following decade. Drained of pre-war idealism and optimism, embattled liberals began to challenge the basic motifs of liberal theology. God was not so immanent, man was not so dignified, and secular culture was not so attractive during this age of indifference and indiscretion. No longer resilient and vital, the liberal movement began to fracture as it absorbed stinging blows of self-criticism. Severely undermined from within, the foundations of liberal thought buckled and collapsed during the early thirties giving rise to a new era of religious thought in this country. From the ruins of the liberal movement emerged American neo-orthodoxy.

The internal critique of religious liberalism should not be equated with early American neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy was a self-conscious and self-sustained movement which crystallized during the early years of the Great Depression. While it prefigured neo-orthodoxy, the internal critique was a distinctly different negative force which functioned solely within the confines of the liberal movement. Moreover, a relatively small percentage of those who contributed to the internal critique actually became proponents of neo-orthodox thought. Few self-critics were intellectually or emotionally prepared to abandon the liberal standard.

Obviously, however, the internal critique of the twenties laid the groundwork for the neo-orthodox revolt of the thirties. The negative focus of neo-orthodoxy was thoroughly delineated during this intense period of liberal self-criticism. The major motifs of liberal theology were laid bare, ready to be employed as foils for the nascent movement. And since the negative implies the positive, the neo-orthodox restatement of liberal theology was extant, to a degree, a decade before the movement actually coagulated.

In essence, then, the late twenties was a period of fermentation for American neo-orthodoxy. The ingredients of the incipient movement brewed and steeped as self-proclaimed liberals chipped away at the cornerstones of liberal theology. The internal critique of liberalism did not cease, to be sure, with the passing of the twenties. In fact, it became even more agitated and frenetic during the early years of the economic depression. It did not truly abate until liberalism disintegrated and neo-orthodoxy emerged as a positive and self-propelled countermovement in American theology.

The Liberal Prophets of Religious Realism

It would be a serious mistake to assume that the internal critique of liberal thought began with the pre-neo-orthodox rebellion of the late twenties. Indeed, the capacity for self-criticism was one of the persistent traits of the liberal movement. Even before the jolting events of the First World War, there were liberal prophets who warned against exaggerated optimism and ebullient idealism. In an effort to debunk the post-neo-orthodox historical caricature of religious liberalism as "an almost ludicrously naive, man-centered American optimism awaiting chastening winds of theological change from abroad," William R. Hutchison has pointed out that such liberals as Edward Mortimer Chapman, Walter Sonneberg, Charles G. Shaw and William W. Fenn were decrying Spencerian optimism during the era of euphoria which preceded the war.[1]

Fenn, Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, was perhaps the most trenchant pre-war critic of liberal thought. He was especially censorious of the optimistic doctrine of man. In an article written for the American Journal of Theology in 1913, Fenn questioned whether liberalism could "bear the weight of the tragedies of human experience." He suggested that the fatal weakness of modern liberalism rested primarily upon its faulty understanding of human nature. Blinded by a facile optimism, liberalism could not perceptively deal with the problem of sin. Modern theology did not square with reality. "Does not its amiable faith in inherent goodness appear but ghastly mockery when confronted by the facts of life?" Accordingly, Fenn warned his fellow liberals that it was better to make too much of sin than too little. "A religious doctrine which cannot bear the weight of the heart-breaking disasters of life will prove a broken reed piercing the hand of him who leans upon it."[2]

The Great War, of course, proved that Fenn was a prophet. It was a "heart-breaking disaster" which demonstrated in bold relief the sinful nature of mankind. Yet, the "broken reed" would not truly pierce the hand of American religious liberalism until the years preceding the Great Depression. Even after the war, liberalism experienced a period of normalcy which lasted until the late twenties, and American theologians who emphasized a radical doctrine of human sin must be considered prophets, less lonely than in pre-war years, but certainly prophets. Two of the most persistent self-critical liberals during the Indian summer of the early twenties were Willard Sperry and Harry Emerson Fosdick.

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[1] Hutchison, "Liberal Protestantism and the 'End of Innocence,'" pp. 128-32.

[2] William W. Fenn, "Modern Liberalism," The American Journal of Theology, 17 (Oct., 1913), pp. 516-17.

Sperry, another "realist" who succeeded Fenn as Dean of the Harvard Divinity School (1922), wrote in 1921 that the traditional Christian doctrine of man no longer made any appeal to the modern mind. This was so, he suggested, because twentieth-century man was simply devoid of a sense of sin. Hence, the traditional gospel of glorious salvation from sin had no impact. Offering the gift of salvation to modern man was like "casting the pearls of our hereditary faith" before men who hardly conceived of themselves as immoral swine, but rather as "moral rajahs whose casket of virtues" was so full that they had no need of any pearls of great price. Sperry decried the understanding of sin which was promulgated in the typical liberal church. It was very seldom that one heard "in the modern pulpit any note approximating to that of the elder theology voicing its burden of human guilt." Indeed, those of the modern world who truly understood the reality of the doctrine of original sin were the biologists, psychologists, novelists and dramatists. These observers and chroniclers of humanity, rather than the liberal churchmen, therefore, had the capacity to deal with the anguished condition of man. Sperry implored the church to make "full and candid use of all that modern science and modern literature have done to restate the doctrine of original sin in intelligible and credible terms, that we may press home to men their lost and needy state."[3]

Fosdick, the liberal churchman par excellence, published a series of lectures in 1922, entitled Christianity and Progress, which included a fascinating chapter about the "Perils of Progress." Modern preachers, Fosdick maintained, were too reticent to speak about sin. While scientists, novelists and psychoanalysts voiced no doubts about the baseness of human nature, churchmen had become blind to the reality of moral evil. Fosdick offered a simple prescription as a cure for this endemic disease of liberal theology:

> All we need to do is to open our eyes to facts. Take one swift glance at the social state of the world today. Consider our desperate endeavours to save this rocking civilization from the consequences of the blow just delivered it by men's iniquities. That should be sufficient to indicate that this is no fool-proof universe automatically progressive, but that moral evil is still the central problem of mankind.[4]

These quotations from Fenn, Sperry and Fosdick indicate that there was explicit liberal self-criticism before the pre-neo-orthodox revolt. The liberal doctrine of man and ideas of progress, especially, came under close scrutiny before 1925. It is difficult to gauge how lonely these liberal prophets were with respect to the movement as a whole. However, as Hutchison suggests, there was a great deal more liberal self-criticism than most interpreters influenced by neo-orthodoxy have been willing to admit. Fenn, Sperry, and Fosdick were hardly "solitary doubting dolphins in the seas of liberal euphoria."[5] Many other liberals uttered periodic misgivings about the theological presuppositions of religious liberalism. Before the late twenties, however, such self-critical utterances were prophetic rather than normative. These widely scattered and generally mild reproofs had little impact upon the overall mood and the direction of the movement. Liberalism always generated an internal critique, but until the underground rebellion of the late twenties, it was never concentrated or severe enough to undermine the very foundations of liberal thought.

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[3] Willard L. Sperry, The Disciplines of Liberty: The Faith and Conduct of the Christian Freeman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), pp. 63-64, 67, 79-80.

[4] Fosdick, Christianity and Progress, pp. 177-78.

The Internal Critique, 1925-1935

A February, 1926 issue of the Christian Century, the most popular and influential liberal weekly, included an intriguing editorial which adumbrated a fairly thorough critique of the common creed of liberal theology. Entitled "Impotent Liberalism," the article suggested that the New Theology had lost its ethical and spiritual vitality because of its over-emphasis upon divine immanence, its inability to view man as sinner and its unqualified optimism concerning the improvability of human society. Confronted with evolutionary theories which seemed to imperil theism, liberalism employed the useful strategy of "absorbing its foes." It was determined to save the faith by "putting God back in nature." But liberalism performed that task too well and placed too much stress upon the immanence of God.

> God, said liberalism, works in nature and through nature. It had a right to say that; but it was said with too little qualification. The result is that liberalism has

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[5] Hutchison, "Liberal Protestantism and the 'End of Innocence,'" p. 136.

> been tempted into an attitude of fatuous optimism. It cannot see sin any more. Since it believes that God is good, and that God is also in nature, it cannot completely escape the logical consequence of finding everything good.[6]

This remarkable editorial presaged the type of self-criticism which would emerge from liberal circles during the late twenties and early thirties. While its arguments were unusually perceptive and wide-ranging, "Impotent Liberalism" was not a unique contribution to the internal critique of the period. A cascade of similar self-critical protests would follow during a decade of mounting unrest within the liberal movement.

Certainly the most devastating internal critic of liberal theology was Reinhold Niebuhr, an activist pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit for thirteen years before his appointment to the faculty of New York's Union Theological Seminary in 1928. A Contributing Editor to the Christian Century and the World Tomorrow, as well as a popular speaker at church conferences, Niebuhr had a decisive impact upon the younger generation of religious liberals during the late twenties and early thirties. Always approaching theology from the perspective of Christian ethics, Niebuhr initially became disillusioned with liberalism because of its inability to sustain moral and ethical potency during the tragedies of the First World War. The war certainly dissolved much of Niebuhr's adolescent idealism and optimism concerning the social efficacy of the Christian faith.[7]

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[6] "Impotent Liberalism," editorial in The Christian Century, 43 (Feb. 11, 1926), pp. 167-68. This article was most likely written by editor Charles Clayton Morrison.

[7] See Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," pp. 1161-63. He claimed, perhaps too emphatically, that the war created his "whole world-view" (p. 1161).

As early as 1920, he was writing about religion's limitations, and soon after he expressed dismay at the social impotency of institutionalized Christianity.[8] In 1923, Niebuhr reflected the secular spirit of disillusionment. He was convinced that the "easy optimism of the nineteenth century" had "pretty thoroughly dissipated." In a statement which made Niebuhr sound like a post-war Fenn, he declared that

> our modern industrial civilization is not the vestibule to the millennium that we thought it was. But it required the horrors of a world war and five years after the war to puncture our pride and reveal the poison of hate and greed which has been corroding our civilization.[9]

Niebuhr's early critique of liberal thought was normally based upon its inability to face up to the awful realities concerning man and his social environment. In 1925 he wrote a short article for the Atlantic Monthly which vigorously condemned liberalism for being "corrupted and vitiated by a facile optimism." Because it had appropriated a Renaissance analysis of human nature, liberalism failed to perceive "how evil essentially good men can be." The liberal faith, according to Niebuhr, deluded itself in the belief that "the monstrous sins which lurk in our economic and political traditions may be overcome by a few well-meaning church resolutions; generally judiciously qualified to soften their vigor." Niebuhr concluded that even orthodox pessimism, which believed the world too evil to be redeemed, had advantages over the "fatuous optimism of most current religious liberalism."[10]

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[8] See Niebuhr, "Religion's Limitations," The World Tomorrow, 3 (March, 1920), pp. 77-79; and "The Paradox of Institutions," The World Tomorrow, 6 (August, 1923), pp. 231-32.

[9] Niebuhr, "The Youth Movement in Germany," The Christian Century, 40 (Nov. 1, 1923), p. 1396.

[10] Niebuhr, "Can Christianity Survive?" The Atlantic Monthly, 135 (Jan., 1925), p. 88.

Niebuhr buttressed his critique later that year when he scored liberalism for its uncritical acceptance of theological monism. While he did not accuse the liberals of succumbing to the virtual pantheism of Christian Science ("'God is good and God is everywhere'---that is religious optimism gone mad"), he did insist that one of the reasons for the moral failure of liberalism rested in its faulty conception of the nature of God. Niebuhr observed that most religious liberals saw no other method of protecting the character of God while absorbing the scientific theories of evolution than by "a new insistence on the immanence of God, working in and through the processes of the natural world." The failure of liberals to preserve a dualistic conception of God resulted in a religious world-view which was "intellectually as untenable" as it was "morally impotent."[11]

A critique of the "trinity" of liberal motifs---divine immanence, human dignity, and cultural adaptation---was completed in 1926 when Niebuhr wrote "Our Secularized Civilization." While this article did not argue for a rigorous "church against the world" theology, it did indicate that Niebuhr was becoming suspicious of full-blown modernism, which he later defined as "the effort of religion to adjust its affirmations to the modern world view."[12] By accepting the norms of science and attempting to discover God in the evolutionary process, liberal religion had relinquished its moral dynamic. "To identify God with automatic processes is to destroy the God of conscience; the God of the real is never the God of the ideal." Liberal

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[11] Niebuhr, "Can Schweitzer Save Us from Russell?" The Christian Century, 42 (Sept. 3, 1925), p. 1094.

[12] Niebuhr, "Would Jesus Be a Modernist Today?" The World Tomorrow, 12 (March, 1929), p. 122.

Protestantism had lost prophetic power because it had "connived with the secularists." Once again Niebuhr opted for a dualistic conception of the universe. It was "better that the world shall be feared than that it be embraced with a good conscience."[13] The ethical weakness of modernism was more vividly adumbrated in a later article intriguingly entitled, "Would Jesus Be a Modernist Today?" "The curse of modern religion," Niebuhr epigrammatized, "is that it is so busy adjusting itself to the modern mind that it can find no energy to challenge the modern conscience."[14]

Niebuhr's critique of liberal thought was fairly well developed by 1927 when he wrote his earliest book, Does Civilization Need Religion?, A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life. It was apparent from the outset that the author, permeated with pessimism and despair, was more impressed with the social limitations than with the social resources of modern religion. The initial words of the first chapter established a negative tone which was maintained throughout the entire book. "Religion," Niebuhr intoned, "is not in a robust state of health in modern civilization." Convinced that "a psychology of defeat" had gripped all the forces of modern religion, Niebuhr exposed the inadequacies of frenzied orthodoxy as well as supine liberalism.[15]

The weaknesses of liberal theology were well catalogued. Zeroing in on a favorite theme, Niebuhr noted that liberalism was "steeped in a religious optimism" which was "true to the facts of neither the world of nature nor the world of history." Sentimental and hopeful about human nature, liberalism failed to grasp the dire complexities of the human situation. "Mere sentiment," warned Niebuhr, "is easily defeated by life's disappointing realities." It was best to operate under the sober assumption that "human nature is neither lovable nor trustworthy in its undisciplined state."[16]

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[13] Niebuhr, "Our Secularized Civilization," The Christian Century, 43 (April 22, 1926), p. 509.

[14] Niebuhr, "Would Jesus Be a Modernist Today?" p. 123.

[15] Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), pp. 1-2.

The book argued vigorously and consistently that the liberal faith had allowed itself to become secularized. Religion could be vital only when "a certain tension" was maintained between it and the civilization in which it functioned. Liberalism, according to Niebuhr, had allowed this tension to be resolved by unhealthy compromises with various cultural forces. The religious and moral life of the liberal church was "a composite into which have entered the imperialism of Rome, the sophistication of the Greeks, the fierce tribalism and individualism of the Nordics and the prudential ethics of an industrial civilization." Captured by the privileged classes and bearing the marks of its social environment, the modern church had been rendered ethically impotent. Niebuhr warned that the liberal church would never become an instrument of social redemption until it was truly willing "to divorce itself from the moral temper of its age." Cultural compromise vitiated the gospel. "The paradox of religion," Niebuhr wrote, "is that it serves the world best when it maintains a high disdain for the world's values."[17]

A distinct separation between faith and culture presupposed a distinct separation between God and the world. After sorting through the philosophical bases of the world's religions, Niebuhr proposed that a tentative dualism was most conducive to ethical passion. The only fruitful alternative to monistic pantheism which identified God and the world, the ideal and the real, "is a dualism which maintains some kind of distinction between them and does not lose one in the other." Liberalism's drift toward immanentism endangered the necessary and distinctive tradition of Christian dualism. "There is," Niebuhr concluded, "no reason why religion should not hold its faith in God without either identifying him with or losing him in the concrete world."[18]

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[16] Ibid., pp. 9-10, 41-42.

[17] Ibid., pp. 68-69, 72-73, 77.

To the end, Does Civilization Need Religion? maintained a negative and pessimistic analysis of modern religion and culture. Even in the concluding chapter, where Niebuhr attempted to rally "a religiously inspired moral idealism" to rescue Western civilization from "moral bankruptcy," it seemed doubtful that he was truly convinced that the liberal church had the ethical and spiritual resources to meet such a challenge. And when the author suggested that "civilization may be beyond moral redemption," his readers, having absorbed the despair of previous chapters, must have been tempted to believe him.[19]

Considering Niebuhr's negative prognosis for religious liberalism, Does Civilization Need Religion? evoked surprisingly favorable responses from liberal theologians. Francis J. McConnell, a liberal Methodist bishop who wrote a long and generous review for the Christian Century, claimed to be grateful for Niebuhr's pessimistic analysis of modern religion. "In the religious camp we ought to be thankful for a change from the cheap and easy nostrums offered for a conflict as deep as that between the real and the ideal."[20] The reviewer for the Methodist Review, Robert Leonard Tucker, was even more effusive in his praise of the book and of Niebuhr, whom he designated as a "rising star" and a "true prophet." Tucker waxed eloquent. In a generation that had "ground out books as the butcher grinds out sausage," it was refreshing to find a work that was "the fruitage of the competent scholarship of a truly creative mind supported by an honesty of statement which is sublimely inexorable."[21]

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[18] Ibid., pp. 194, 213.

[19] Ibid., pp. 237-38.

Always aware of his own fallibility, Niebuhr must have been somewhat incredulous when he read these reviews. Actually, Does Civilization Need Religion? was an undistinguished contribution to American theology. It was quite disjointed, obtuse and indecisive. A relatively bold critique of liberal thought, the book was inconclusive about theological alternatives. J. A. MacCallum, who was fairly sympathetic toward the book as a whole, remained dissatisfied by the manner in which Niebuhr worked out his basic postulations. "Something vital is lacking," wrote MacCallum. He suggested that the author might be criticized for "failure to think his position through."[22]

The critique of liberalism, which Niebuhr weaved during the twenties, supplied the warp and woof of his revolt against liberalism during the early thirties. Even after he had developed a positive neo-orthodox perspective, he continued to hammer relentlessly at the foundations of liberal thought. Niebuhr's internal critique survived as a rigid stereotype of liberalism long after he had moved outside the liberal movement.

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[20] Francis J. McConnell, "A Challenge to Complacency," The Christian Century, 45 (Feb. 16, 1928), p. 208.

[21] Robert Leonard Tucker, review of Does Civilization, The Methodist Review, 111 (May, 1928), pp. 469-70.

[22] J. A. MacCallum, review of Does Civilization, The Reformed Church Messenger, 101 (April 19, 1928), p. 11.

Liberal theology was especially vulnerable to the Niebuhrian onslaught, of course, during the initial years of the Great Depression. Niebuhr contributed an article to the Christian Century in 1931, "Let Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!" which registered a blistering attack upon the liberal "dogma of optimism," the belief "that the world is gradually growing better and that the inevitability of gradualness guarantees our salvation." This illusion of optimism had prevented the liberal church from making a "realistic estimate of the moral problems" of contemporary society.[23] A summary criticism of liberalism, "A Christian Philosophy of Compromise," written during 1933, focused upon the same basic theme. Niebuhr defined "the theory of liberalism" as a conviction that "man is by nature good and that he needs only to be encouraged more efficaciously in social action to become a more socialized person." Such a notion was scorned as a "naive assumption." Liberalism was inherently blind to the fact that we live in a "world of sin," a fact which orthodoxy never overlooked. Liberals were simply foolish to believe that by preaching an ideal of love they could create a world of brotherliness. This radical misconception of the nature of man was "too facile to be profound and too simple to do justice to the tragic facts of human existence."[24]

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[23] Niebuhr, "Let Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!" The Christian Century, 48 (March 25, 1931), p. 402.

[24] Niebuhr, "A Christian Philosophy of Compromise," The Christian Century, 50 (June 7, 1933), pp. 746-48.

Each of Niebuhr's early neo-orthodox books maintained the unsympathetic and unyielding caricatures of liberal thought which were developed during the late twenties. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), designated by historical consensus as the clarion call to American neo-orthodoxy, ridiculed liberalism for imbibing the "evolutionary optimism and the romantic overestimates of human virtue" which characterized the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement. Furthermore, liberal Protestantism was accused of ethical hypocrisy because it was rooted in the privileged classes of Western civilization. It was a religion which subsisted on the "sentimentalities and illusions of the comfortable."[25] Niebuhr's next book, Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), portrayed liberalism as irredeemably optimistic with respect to human society. Liberalism, among its other deficiencies, failed "to develop either a conception of sin for which grace is really required or yet a conception of grace which maintains the idea of the sinfulness and imperfection of the world."[26] Employing an equally wooden caricature, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935) scored liberalism for supinely succumbing to modern secular culture. "In adjusting itself to the characteristic credos and prejudices of modernity," wrote Niebuhr, "the liberal church has been in constant danger of obscuring what is distinctive in the Christian message and creative in Christian morality."[27]

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[25] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), pp. 78-80.

[26] Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 291-92.

[27] Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 5.

By the mid-thirties it was evident that Niebuhr's critique of liberalism had solidified into a rigid stereotype which was being utilized as a foil or fulcrum for his nascent neo-orthodox theology.

Again, as in the case of Fenn, the "prophet" was not alone in his trenchant analysis of liberal thought. There was a deep undercurrent of disaffection which surfaced in liberal articles and books even before the Wall Street debacle. Robert W. Frank, for instance, wrote a piece for the Christian Century in 1928 which underscored the pessimism of Jesus. The writer argued that the contemporary view of Jesus needed to be corrected. Jesus was not "an incorrigible optimist, a la Robert Browning, a sort of spiritual Polyanna, who refused to be depressed even in the presence of tragic moral failure." On the contrary, "no man saw more clearly the existing and threatening evils of his day or pointed them out with more unerring accuracy." Frank compared Jesus to the true Jewish prophets who "refused to let Israel rest in a false optimism and persistently sought to destroy her comforting but deceptive illusions." Likewise, the article was quite obviously an attempt to destroy "the comforting but deceptive illusions" of the false prophets of religious liberalism.[28]

That same year, Charles Fiske, the Episcopalian bishop of Central New York, attacked liberalism for its spiritual and moral impotency in The Confessions of a Puzzled Parson, And Other Pleas for Reality. The book was essentially a composite of previously published essays by an author who was impatient with the "pussyfooting" of contemporary Christianity. The articles were introduced as "pleas for reality in religion, for honest inquiry into the problems, ethical or social, economic or political, with which religion may be concerned."[29] Despite this tantalizing foretaste, the puzzled parson's pleas for reality were basically amorphous and unsatisfying. Fiske sensed the inadequacies of liberalism, but failed to construct a basic critique. In this respect, he was certainly not unique among self-critical liberals during the twenties. Indeed, most of the internal critiques were devoid of the incisive critical focus which generally distinguished the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr.

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[28] Robert W. Frank, "The Pessimism of Jesus," The Christian Century, 45 (August 9, 1928), pp. 974-75.

At the turn of the decade, however, when the Great Crash was proving to be a prelude to the Great Depression, the internal critique of liberalism, in the writings of others as in those of Niebuhr himself, became increasingly precise and comprehensive. The mood of crisis and despair was immediately reflected in the articles and books which were published during the early depression era. For example, in 1930, Henry P. Van Dusen edited a volume of essays by prominent churchmen which was suggestively entitled Ventures in Belief: Christian Convictions for a Day of Uncertainty. Also in 1930, Powell H. Norton, a New Jersey clergyman, expressed not only his distress over a newly published book by Joseph Wood Krutch, but also his disenchantment with the modern theological enterprise when he submitted an article called "The Modern Distemper" to the Crozer Quarterly. During the following year, Reinhold Niebuhr delivered an address to the World YMCA Conference in Cleveland concerning "The Crisis of Society," while his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, entitled a Yale Alumni Lecture, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment."[30] It seemed that religious liberals had been plunged, almost en masse, into a solemn period of reappraisal and readjustment.

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[29] Charles Fiske, The Confessions of a Puzzled Parson, And Other Pleas for Reality (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. vii.

No one captured this new mood of American religious liberalism more poignantly than Walter Marshall Horton, a young professor of theology at Oberlin. In 1930, Horton wrote *Theism and the Modern Mood*, a widely read defense of empirical theism against the corrosive arguments of the secular humanists. This brilliantly written book[31] captured the spirit of despair and disillusionment which pervaded American society during the early thirties. As he reflected on the just-buried twenties, Horton came to some fairly severe post-Crash conclusions. For instance, he discerned that the social idealism and optimism which had inspired pre-war America had totally dissolved during the frivolous third decade. He claimed, in retrospect, that superficially, the twenties was "a light-hearted age" which had "tossed the grave responsibilities of the previous decade gaily off its shoulders, and gone in for the pursuit of pleasure and material comforts, without a single *arrière-pensée*." Actually, however, there was little mirth in

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[30] Henry P. Van Dusen, ed., *Ventures in Belief: Christian Convictions for a Day of Uncertainty*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930; Powell H. Norton, "The Modern Distemper," *The Crozer Quarterly*, *7* (Jan., 1930), pp. 24-46; Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Crisis of Society," *The Christian*, *7* (Sept. 5, 1931), pp. 682-84; and H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," Alumni Lecture, Yale, 1931. Unpublished paper in possession of Mrs. H. Richard Niebuhr and Richard R. Niebuhr. Cited by their permission.

[31] Julius Seeyle Bixler lauded the "aesthetic sensitiveness" of the book and suggested that it was "worthy of a place beside the works of such able 'humanist' writers as Krutch, Lippmann, and Bertrand Russell." Bixler, "A Critique of Humanism," *The Journal of Religion*, *10* (July, 1930), p. 440.

America's gaiety because it was "all flavored with the gall of bitterness." Horton decided that jazz was the perfect symbol for the mood of the twenties: "raucous ribaldry on the surface, with a deep undercurrent of the blues, syncopated to conceal the heartbreak, blaring loud dissonant defiance at all who would presume to question the genuineness of its hilarity." The merriment of the age was likened to "one who has trusted and been betrayed, one who plunges into revelry in an endeavor to forget his mental misery." While Horton observed that the contemporary era was "wistfully in quest of religious sustenance and religious certitude, and almost pathetically credulous when given half a chance," he could not escape the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that it was, nevertheless, "an age of skepticism, cynicism and disillusionment."[32]

Horton's critique of religious liberalism, in light of the modern mood, was made dramatically clear in "The Present Predicament of Religion," an article which he wrote in 1931 for the Intercollegian, a journal of the student division of the Y.M.C.A. He explained that liberalism had not caught on with the new generation because it was out of tune with the disillusionments of the present age. The younger generation was "in no mood to view the world happily and hopefully, through rose-colored glasses." Horton proceeded to construct a caricature of liberalism which was ideally suited for his despairing critique. Rooting the liberal faith in the "optimistic idealism" of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, Horton observed that it was, by nature, "jocund and hopeful." Disseminated throughout American Protestant denominations, liberalism promulgated

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[32] Walter Marshall Horton, Theism and the Modern Mood (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), pp. 6-7, 10.

> a gospel of sweetness and light, hope and cheer; a gospel of inevitable progress, 'onward and upward forever'; a gospel of self-reliance and self-expression, with no gloomy sense of sin to becloud one's self-complacency.

In revolt against any form of "high-flown idealism and sanguine optimism, sentimental bunk and enthusiastic 'uplift,'" young people were wary of liberal theology. Unable to conclude the article with a traditional "happy ending," Horton insisted that American religion was in a real predicament because the dominant liberal faith had failed to meet the crises of the post-war era. The failure of liberalism had resulted in a religious vacuum. Horton was uncertain about the future of religion in America, but his last paragraph tentatively hinted how the vacuum might be filled.

> Perhaps if the present predicament of religion could be felt with tragic intensity, it might lead. . .to a great religious revulsion and revival, that would give America a soul once more. Who knows?[33]

In the "Present Predicament of Religion," Horton criticized liberalism almost exclusively for its unbridled optimism and idealism. "The Impotence of God," written during the same year for the Christian Century, attacked the liberal doctrine of divine immanence. Horton confessed that the modern conception of God was much more intellectually satisfying and rationally palatable than the orthodox conception of God, "the God of early childhood, whom we all leave behind with our alphabet blocks and our skipping-ropes." Yet, complained Horton, the liberal God was too refined, rarefied and effete to be of any help in time of trouble. He warned that whatever the theologians and philosophers decided about divine nature, the fact of the matter was that "men prefer a roughhewn concept of God which has power to kindle the imagination and grip the emotions, to a finely chiseled concept which is emotionally sterile and practically impotent." The liberal doctrine of God had failed the test of reality, the test of life. "The battle between the gods," concluded Horton, "is not decided in the calm atmosphere of the classroom, but in the heat of life's combat."[34]

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[33] Horton, "The Present Predicament of Religion," The Intercollegian, 48 (June, 1931), pp. 285-86, 290.

Horton's caustic internal critique of liberal theology culminated in his major contribution to early American neo-orthodoxy, Realistic Theology, which was published in 1934. The first chapter of the book, a brilliant examination of "The Decline of Liberalism and the Rise of Realism," documented a crucial turning point in Horton's thought. It revealed a self-critical liberal who, after years of growing disenchantment, abandoned liberal theology, at least temporarily,[35] in favor of burgeoning neo-orthodoxy.

Horton blamed the decline of liberalism upon its inordinate desire to liberalize or modernize the Christian gospel. Liberal faith had succumbed to "a compromising alliance with the peculiar presuppositions, prejudices, and illusions" of modern Western civilization. Having assimilated the characteristic thought-forms of a particular era of history, religious liberalism was "foredoomed to perish with the passing of the era." Already in 1934, Horton was convinced that liberalism had been drained of its "vital sap" by the general change in intellectual climate since the First World War. Although their flesh was still warm, it was evident to Horton that the fundamental concepts of religious liberalism were dead---"as dead as the shibboleths of the Gnostics and the Arians."[36]

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[34] Horton, "The Impotence of God," The Christian Century, 48 (March 18, 1931), pp. 370-73.

[35] In 1939, Horton would insist that, although he had been led "to the verge of orthodoxy" during the early thirties, he had not completely abandoned his liberal perspectives. See Horton, "Between Liberalism and the New Orthodoxy," The Christian Century, 56 (May 17, 1939), pp. 637-40.

By the early thirties, the internal critique of liberalism began to seep into the churches. Elmer G. Homrighausen, a young pastor of the Carrollton Avenue Reformed Church in Indianapolis, wrote two articles for the Christian Century which exemplified the stirring of a grassroots revolt. In 1931 Homrighausen unleashed "A Young Minister's Counter-Revolt." He leveled some heavy blasts at the liberal ministry which he felt was being cowed by a "group of intelligentsia" who were "smiling with a sneer at the man of faith." The Protestant pulpit was filled with men who were "bewildered" and "bereft of the radiance of their faith," afraid to make positive statements about the gospel because their assertions would not stand up in "the court of the intellectuals." These disillusioned ministers were simply "holding their positions because of mere economic necessity or the feeling that a morality-preaching pulpit" was "better than a vacant one." Homrighausen called for a counter-revolt against this whole modern caste of intellectualized theologians. It was time to ask "whether their method has produced any faith, whether their technique really arrives at the real." It was time they were challenged "to produce something positive or get off the field, that they recognize their sterility and surrender their self-aggrandized leadership." Homrighausen complained that the liberal theologians had bowed to the false idol of intellectual consistency. The zeal of the Christian faith had been tempered by their cautious intellectualism. He insisted that the gospel was "not primarily an intellectual, but a moral and emotional challenge." The caste of the intelligentsia, which had even conjured up an impotent conception of God, "a jelly-fish God of 'process' or 'mind stuff'" which possessed "neither individuality nor challenging power," needed to be spurned by the rising generation of American liberals. "The intellect," warned Homrighausen, "will never lead to profound and vital faith."[37]

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[36] Horton, Realistic Theology (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), pp. 5, 8.

The following year Homrighausen extended his critique of the liberal church in an article which asked, "Can the Protestant Sermon Survive?" Admitting that modern preachers were well-trained and well-read, he concluded, nevertheless, that there was a "vacuum" in the present-day preaching which made it "hollow and dead." He suggested that these modern-day ministers had no "good news" to proclaim to our world from "the mysterious and inaccessible heights," only philosophical essays, sociological treatises and psychological analyses. Protestantism was simply "a negative blur," and its preachers only "essayists, critics, hesitant connoisseurs of intellectual notions, informants." Homrighausen surmised that liberal sermons lacked dynamic power because liberal theology had dissolved the distinction between God and man. "The Beyond has faded into the Here, the object and the subject have been wedded in an indissoluble union, and the object has taken the subject's name!" The Absolute had been relativized, and "the awful sense of God's sovereignty, individuality, and apartness" had faded away. The liberal pulpit was impotent because there was no "tremendous objective truth" coming from behind the liberal preacher. There was no sovereignty "standing in its own right, ready to substantiate itself, independent of man's puny intellectual apologetic." Liberal sermons lacked "the audacity of divine compulsion." Rooted in subjective idealism, religious liberalism was woefully devoid of the sort of "divine foolishness and recklessness" which was necessary to stir the hearts of modern-day Christians.[38]

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[37] Elmer G. Homrighausen, "A Young Minister's Counter-Revolt," The Christian Century, 48 (Feb. 18, 1931), pp. 236-38.

Another self-critical liberal who bemoaned the impotency of the modern pulpit was Edwin Lewis, a prominent theologian at Drew University School of Theology. In 1933, Lewis wrote a bombastic article for Religion in Life, "The Fatal Apostasy of the Modern Church," which caused tremendous repercussions in American Methodism. Long considered a spokesman for liberalism, Lewis indicated that he had become seriously disillusioned by liberalism's alliance with modern culture. He was convinced that the essentials of the Christian faith had been sacrificed at the altar of modernity. "We so freely allowed the influence of contemporary forces in the development of doctrine as to have endangered the continuity of that living core of truth and reality for which contemporary forces were but the *milieu*." Having sown the wind, the liberal faith was now confronted with the whirlwind. Upon examination of the modern church, Lewis despaired that there were so few prophets in the pulpit. The acids of modernity had so eroded the liberal faith that liberal preachers had nothing of eternal significance left to proclaim. Lewis bewailed the plight of liberal sermonizing:

> Those who come to listen will not be brought face to face with eternal verities. Hungry sheep will look up but will not be fed. Men harassed with a thousand problems. . .will go away as impotent as they came. . . . They go to Gilead, and there is no balm. They go to

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[38] Homrighausen, "Can the Protestant Sermon Survive?" The Christian Century, 49 (Jan. 27, 1932), pp. 114-16.

> the fountain of waters, and they find there a broken cistern. They cry for bread, and behold a stone.[39]

This vigorous critique of liberalism was pursued by Lewis in his important contribution to early American neo-orthodoxy, A Christian Manifesto, published in 1934. Again he asserted that liberalism had over-adjusted its theology to the thought-forms of modern culture. As a result, the vital core of faith had been unnecessarily exscinded. The Christian creed, which could have thrown light upon the accumulated riddles of the modern mind had been reduced to "a flickering candle, around which we place a nervous hand lest even that much of light should be extinguished by cold winds of doubt." Liberalism had been far too passive and apologetic. "We have a faith," Lewis announced. "Let us be done with forever half-heartedly apologizing for it, and instead let us aggressively, confidently, and self-forgetfully proclaim it."[40]

The Demise of Religious Liberalism

As the internal critique of liberal theology became more pervasive and persistent during the crisis-ridden early thirties, theological observers systematically documented the sickness, the demise, and the burial of the liberal movement in America. Most of the prominent "doom-sayers" were themselves liberals (or former liberals) who sincerely mourned the passing of the theological system which had nurtured them during a happier era. To those privileged to a post-sixties perspective upon American religious history, it is now apparent, in the overworked phrase of Mark Twain, that the rumors of liberalism's demise were greatly exaggerated. During the early thirties, however, liberalism seemed to be in such desperate condition that its death was nearly proclaimed by acclamation.

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[39] Edwin Lewis, "The Fatal Apostasy of the Modern Church," Religion in Life, 2 (Autumn, 1933), pp. 483, 488-89.

[40] Lewis, A Christian Manifesto (New York: Abingdon Press, 1934), p. 28.

In 1931, Henry P. Van Dusen, of Union Seminary in New York, submitted an article to the World Tomorrow which was ominously entitled, "The Sickness of Liberal Religion." He rendered this introductory observation: "Possibly the most certain fact in the present baffling religious situation is the ill-health of liberal Christianity." A number of symptoms were cited to substantiate this pessimistic diagnosis---a falling off of missionary support, losses in actual church enrollment, a decline of inner religious certainty among the rank and file of the laity, and a mood of desperation among the liberal ministry.[41]

In an article which appeared a few months later in Religion in Life, Van Dusen expanded upon his dire analysis of the liberal movement. Earlier in the century, liberalism had won all of its major battles---a critical view of the Bible, the harmonization of religion with science, the fight for freedom of interpretation, faith in human achievement, and emphasis upon personal experiment and internal authority. These battle cries, however, no longer stirred response. No longer an expression of the prevailing temper of the hour, liberalism was a declining influence. In an era of crisis, there was need for a more "solid" and "meaty" theology. Van Dusen believed that, despite pure motives, liberalism had "betrayed the cause of true religion" when it sought to modernize the historic faith. "In seeking to save theology from annihilation by the accepted thought-forms of the secular world, it has itself become a pallid reflection of secular philosophy."[42] By capitulating to secular culture, liberalism had signed its own death warrant.

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[41] Van Dusen, "The Sickness of Liberal Religion," The World Tomorrow, 14 (August, 1931), p. 256.

During the fall of 1933, John C. Bennett, then a young professor at Auburn Seminary, delineated the demise of religious liberalism for the readers of the Christian Century. In a remarkable article which was suggestively entitled, "After Liberalism---What?", Bennett noted that the most significant trend in contemporary American theology "was the disintegration of liberalism." The structural unity of theological liberalism was literally "coming to pieces." As a result, the self-confidence of the liberal preachers, who had always drawn upon a coherent pattern of theological assumptions, had seriously eroded. Many liberals were left with "a feeling of theological homelessness." Bennett warned that the essential motifs of liberal theology would be lost in "the present stampede" unless liberalism was willing to submit to corrective surgery.[43]

Gaius Glenn Atkins, a venerable Chicago-school liberal, uncomfortably posed the question, "Whither Liberalism?" for Religion in Life in 1934. The author realized that liberalism was in a state of severe distress. He perceived that a number of America's younger religious leaders had moved beyond liberalism into something ("they have not yet found a name") of a far more radical character. In his survey of the decline and fall of the liberal movement, Atkins admitted that religious liberals had been unjustifiably optimistic and idealistic about the human situation. "The roots of their faith were in the lush and shallow growth of pre-war idealism and were scorched by the fires which consumed it." Atkins suspected, furthermore, that many liberals, in their desire to adapt the gospel to modern culture, had "surrendered the central positions around which religion has always been organized." While he decried the demise of liberal theology, Atkins was convinced that liberalism had had its day in the sun. Liberalism had fallen into disfavor, and its spirit had darkened. "The glow is gone," concluded a disheartened Atkins. One had only to compare the Christian Century of the present day to the Outlook of 1900 to see what had happened.[44]

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[42] Van Dusen, "Trends in Contemporary Theism," Religion in Life, 1 (Spring, 1932), pp. 181-82.

[43] John C. Bennett, "After Liberalism---What?" The Christian Century, 50 (Nov. 8, 1933), p. 1403.

Indeed, the glow was gone. Only a few months before Atkins' article appeared, the once radiant Christian Century ran an editorial which was entitled, "Protestantism at the End of an Era." The writer, probably editor Morrison, noted that Protestantism was in "a mood of desperation." Immobilized by ineptitude and uncertainty, the church had been willing "to stand by and allow secular factors to determine the future form and function of organized Christianity." Pronouncing that the liberal church had been a passive captive of capitalistic Western culture, the writer prescribed an ascetic stance of world-renunciation. The editorial of this traditionally activistic and world-affirming periodical proposed that the church be set against the world.

> It will never find its way back to its true character until it sets up an autonomous life of its own, in ascetic renunciation of all responsible involvements

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[44] Gaius Glenn Atkins, "Whither Liberalism?" Religion in Life, 3 (Summer, 1934), pp. 335-39.

> with capitalistic mammonism, and accepts a state of tension with the political and secular order as the normal and perpetual condition for realizing its social vision of God's Kingdom.[45]

By 1935, liberalism had been subjected to a thorough battery of critical diagnoses. Theological "doctors" had taken blood tests, probed with needles, and listened with stethoscopes in their ceaseless efforts to analyze, and in certain cases resuscitate, the almost lifeless body of religious liberalism. The titles of any number of religious articles during the early thirties indicated that the collapse of liberalism had become a theological cause célèbre. Besides those articles already cited, Wilhelm Pauck asked "What is Wrong With Liberalism?," Henry Sloan Coffin wondered "Can Liberalism Survive?," and Arthur Cushman McGiffert tentatively proposed "The Future of Liberal Christianity in America."[46]

The demise of liberalism was officially ritualized in December, 1935, when Harry Emerson Fosdick, who served as the "sin-bearer for liberalism,"[47] submitted the sermon, "Beyond Modernism," to the Christian Century. Fosdick's sermon might be considered the official obituary of American religious liberalism. Defining modernism as "an adaptation, an adjustment, an accommodation of Christian faith to contemporary scientific thinking," Fosdick was careful to defend those who initiated the modernistic spirit. It emerged as "a desperately needed way of thinking." But Fosdick quickly proceeded to score modernism for its apparent shallowness and transiency: "It arose out of a temporary intellectual crisis; it took a special type of scientific thinking as a standard; it became an adaptation to, a harmonization with, the intellectual culture of, a particular generation." Such a transparent religion, Fosdick warned, was not adequate to "represent the Eternal and claim the allegiance of the soul." Following a long discourse in which Fosdick scored liberalism for excessive intellectualism, dangerous sentimentalism, and impotent theism, he concluded with this oft-quoted emotional plea.

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[45] "Protestantism at the End of an Era," editorial in The Christian Century, 51 (April 25, 1934), pp. 550-52.

[46] Wilhelm Pauck, "What is Wrong with Liberalism?" The Journal of Religion, 15 (April, 1935), pp. 146-60; Henry Sloan Coffin, "Can Liberalism Survive?" Religion in Life, 4 (Spring, 1935), pp. 194-203; and Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "The Future of Liberal Christianity in America," The Journal of Religion, 15 (April, 1935), pp. 161-75.

[47] Horton, Realistic Theology, p. 4.

> We must go beyond modernism! And in that new enterprise the watchword will be not, Accommodate yourself to the prevailing culture! but Stand out from it and challenge it! For this inescapable fact, which again and again in Christian history has called modernism to its senses, we face: we cannot harmonize Christ himself with modern culture. What Christ does to modern culture is to challenge it.[48]

Fosdick was the bellwether of twentieth century American liberal theology. His attack upon modernism, therefore, underscored the desperate condition of religious liberalism during the early thirties. Its collapse could no longer be seriously disputed. By 1935, another system of thought, one which went "beyond modernism," had supplanted liberalism as the new thrust, the new leading edge of theology in America.

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[48] Fosdick, "Beyond Modernism," The Christian Century, 52 (Dec. 4, 1935), pp. 1549-52.

CHAPTER III

CONTINENTAL INFLUENCE ON THE TRANSITION FROM LIBERALISM TO NEO-ORTHODOXY

Early American neo-orthodoxy was closely related to the "theology of crisis" which exploded in Europe after the First World War. Despite its somewhat belated appearance, Barthian thought began to trickle into the religious consciousness of this country during the late twenties. Within a relatively short time, the trickle grew into a steady flow of critiques and translations. By the mid-thirties, the theology of crisis had been quite thoroughly introduced and explicated.

Continental crisis theology definitely stimulated the initial exponents of American neo-orthodoxy. These disaffected liberals were greatly impressed by this dynamic and self-assertive movement which had routed Protestant liberalism in Europe, and they were anxious for its message to be heard in this country. To this end, they served as Barthian translators and interpreters.

While the formulators of American neo-orthodoxy were clearly influenced by European crisis theology, they did not become full-fledged Barthians. Infused with the social and ethical temper of American liberalism, these theologians simply could not accept the most radical features of Barthian thought. Undeniably stimulated by its Continental predecessor, the neo-orthodox movement which blossomed in this country was, nevertheless, peculiarly American.

This chapter will explore the emerging awareness of Barthianism in America---its rejection by the liberals, and its muted impact upon indigenous neo-orthodoxy.

The Emergence of European Neo-Orthodoxy

American religious liberalism survived the jolt of the First World War superficially unscathed. "Overhead the banner of Normalcy fluttered listlessly."[1] The same claim, however, could not be made for European religious liberalism. Liberalism in Europe, which had so buoyantly proclaimed human dignity, divine immanence and continuity between church and culture for more than a century, was shattered by the devastating crisis wrought by the war. Born in an age of hope and optimism, *Kulturprotestantismus* seemed totally inadequate for an age of crisis and disaster.

Even before the war, Europe had listened to warnings of cultural crisis from such disparate prophets as Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Overbeck and Miguel Unamuno. But German idealism, delineated by Schleiermacher and renovated by Ritschl and Herrmann, did not really begin to crumble until it was jolted by the brutal events of 1914-1918. By the end of the war, the mood of Europe had dramatically darkened, and the immediate post-war years were filled with pessimism and despair. Published in 1918, Oswald Spengler's ponderous but timely historical analysis, *The Decline of the West*, quickly gained a hearing on the crisis-ridden Continent.[2]

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[1] Ahlstrom, "Continental Influence," p. 260.

[2] Originally published as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Gestalt und Wirklichkeit*. A second volume appeared in 1922 under the title, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Welthistorische Perspektiven*. Translations of the two volumes were first made available in America in 1926 and 1928, respectively. Wilhelm Pauck, who had grown up in Germany during the war, remembered the searing impact which Spengler's book had upon his impressionable mind in 1920. "I read it with burning eyes and a throbbing head, fairly swallowing its pages. I was fascinated by its brilliant, utterly astonishing historical analyses; and. . .it introduced me to an understanding of the times in which I was to live---an understanding that made me shudder." Pauck, "Theological Education as I See It." *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register*, *29* (Nov., 1939), p. 2.

The decline of liberalism was accompanied by the stir of a "theological renaissance" throughout Europe.[3] Albert Schweitzer had overturned fertile soil for a new movement in Biblical exegesis when he published Quest of the Historical Jesus in 1906. Pronouncing liberalism's effort to discover the true historical Jesus a hopeless failure, Schweitzer demonstrated that the New Testament was primarily apocalyptic and eschatological. Schweitzer did not pursue his own findings, but he inaugurated an evangelical revolution in Biblical scholarship which was carried on by Martin Dibelius, Karl Ludwig Schmidt, and Rudolf Bultmann.

Reformation scholarship also burgeoned following the war. In Germany, Karl Holl and Werner Elert helped to resurrect Luther who had become obscured by an Enlightenment caricature. Other scholars even began to picture Calvin in a more favorable contemporary light. In Sweden, the Luther studies of Einar Billing at Lund were augmented by Anders Nygren's two-part study of the Christian doctrine of love, Agape and Eros (1930, 1936), and Gustav Aulén's study of the atonement, Christus Victor (1930). These brilliant scholars gave rise to the influential Lundensian theology.

The most significant facet of the post-war theological renaissance, of course, was the theology of crisis. In 1919, Karl Barth, the pastor of a small church at Safenwil in the canton of Aargau, Switzerland, turned the theological world of Europe upside-down with his strange commentary on

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[3] Ahlstrom, Religious History, p. 934. The following discussion of post-liberal Biblical and Reformation studies is indebted to Ahlstrom. See Religious History, pp. 934-36; and "Continental Influence," pp. 262-63.

St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans.[4] Emotional, energetic and explosive, Der Römerbrief, according to Karl Adam, "fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians."[5] Europe quickly began to take note of Herrmann's brilliant student who so dramatically proclaimed the utter transcendence of God, the utter feebleness of man and the utter discontinuity between the temporal and the eternal. Barth's new theological emphases constituted a virtual rejection of his liberal heritage, a fact which partially explained the popularity of Der Römerbrief. It was a theology which could stand up to the personal and cultural crises which had immobilized post-war Europe. Defeated and devastated, Germany became especially susceptible to the radical theology espoused by Barth, and there he began his long academic career. In 1921, he accepted a professorship at Göttingen, and moved from there to Münster (1925) and Bonn (1930) before being forced by the Nazi government to leave Germany in 1935.

Barth was surely the most commanding figure in the movement that came to be known as the theology of crisis, the dialectical theology, or, as its proponents preferred, the theology of the Word of God. Many independent European theologians contributed to the emerging movement. Eduard Thurneysen, a Swiss, as well as Friedrich Gogarten and Georg Merz, both Germans, helped Barth inaugurate and edit a new theological journal, Zwischen den Zeiten, which began publication in 1923. For many years, this journal served as the mouthpiece of European neo-orthodoxy. After Barth, however, Emil Brunner of Zurich was the most prominent exponent of the theology of crisis. And it was Brunner, despite personal and theological differences with Barth, who did the most to bring the essence of Barthian thought to America.

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[4] It is a common misconception that Der Römerbrief was first published in 1918. While the Preface to the first edition was written at Safenwil, August, 1918, the book was not published until the following year by G. A. Bäschlin, "a more or less locally limited publishing house" in Bern. See Wilhelm Pauck, Karl Barth: Prophet of a New Christianity? (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), p. 53. It is ironic that Pauck proceeded to misspell the publisher's name, citing G. A. Bläschlin in the bibliography as well as an explanatory footnote (pp. 221-22).

[5] Quoted from John McConnachie, "The Teaching of Karl Barth: A New Positive Movement in German Theology," The Hibbert Journal, 25 (April, 1927), pp. 385-86. McConnachie gleaned Adam's famous metaphor from a June, 1926 number of Hochland, "the leading Catholic monthly in Germany." (p. 385).

Early Encounters with an Enigma

Barth's commentary on Romans may have exploded in 1919 like a bombshell on the theological playground of Europe, but it took many years for the shock waves to reach the theological playgrounds of America. For nearly a decade, American theologians remained almost oblivious to the new religious movement which was being forged in Europe. The first journal article devoted to the crisis theology did not appear until 1926, and then it was submitted by a church historian from Germany. The first English translation of a major Barthian publication did not become available until 1928. The first significant commentary on Barthian thought was not published in America until 1931. And the bombshell itself, Der Römerbrief, was not translated into English until 1933. The theology of crisis hardly swept America off its theological feet.

News of the European crisis theology barely trickled into America during the early twenties. In fact, the religious press contained hardly a whisper about Barth or his explosive commentary. While studying as a Fellow at

Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1919-1920, Emil Brunner did write an article for the American Journal of Theology which cited Der Römerbrief as a work which exemplified "The New Religious Movement in Switzerland." This piece, however, was actually an account of the revolutionary religious socialism (a movement which had claimed Barth as well as Brunner) espoused by the Swiss prophets, Hermann Kutter and Leonhard Ragaz, rather than an introduction to the theology of crisis.[6]

In 1924, Adolf Keller, Secretary of the Central Bureau of Relief of the Evangelical Churches of Europe, submitted an article to the Christian Work, "The Stolen Bell of Europe," which mentioned Barthianism merely as an aside. Essentially a plea for American funds to rebuild war-ravaged German Protestantism, it briefly cited Barth and his students as heading a movement which placed new emphasis upon the transcendence of God. Keller noted that the failure of European culture had prompted Barth to conclude that God was too closely identified with man's aims. "He finds," Keller wrote about Barth, "that God and men are more opposites [sic] than was said yesterday; that there is no breach from below[,] from mankind to Him, no theology, no piety, no morality---only Christ."[7]

Such was the oblique manner in which the crisis theology was commended to America. Barthianism was introduced as an aside by the Swiss correspondent of an unpretentious American religious weekly. Still, "The Stolen Bell" did create some interest in the new movement. Elmer G. Homrighausen, for instance, recalls that he ran across Keller's "provocative article" in 1924 while attending Princeton Seminary. His first taste of Barthian thought, Homrighausen remembers, "piqued" his mind and whetted his appetite for the second German edition of Der Römerbrief which hit him with "soul-shaking force" during the late twenties.[8] Homrighausen's experience, however, was unique. There is no evidence that "The Stolen Bell" whetted other American appetites for the theology of crisis. Barth remained an enigma.

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[6] H. Emil Brunner, "The New Religious Movement in Switzerland," The American Journal of Theology, 24 (July, 1920), pp. 426-27.

[7] Adolf Keller, "The Stolen Bell in Europe," The Record of Christian Work, 116 (March 15, 1924), pp. 342-44.

Although they may have learned about European neo-orthodoxy from the British religious journals,[9] it is more likely that American liberals were introduced to the subtleties of Barthianism by Gustav Krüger, a professor of church history at Giessen. In July, 1926, the Harvard Theological Review published the important lectures on the theology of crisis which this venerable German scholar had delivered during the previous March at New York's Union Seminary. A second generation Ritschlian and a student of Harnack, Krüger admitted at the outset that the new movement was "entirely opposed to what we older men have been taught and have ourselves been teaching." Whatever his theological bias, however, Krüger recognized that the theology of crisis was having a startling impact upon contemporary German theology. And since the subject had "not hitherto been treated in English," the lectures were intended as an introduction to Barthianism.[10]

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[8] Elmer G. Homrighausen, "Introduction" to Karl Barth, God in Action, trans. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (Manhasset, N.Y.: Round Table Press, 1963), p. xii; and Homrighausen, letter to Dennis N. Voskuil, postmarked Nov. 14, 1972.

[9] A number of early interpretive articles appeared in British journals. See Hugh Ross Mackintosh, "Recent Foreign Theology," The Expository Times, 36 (Nov., 1924), pp. 73-75; Adolf Keller, "A Theology of Crisis," The Expositor, 3 (March and April, 1925), pp. 164-75, 245-60; and John McConnachie, "The Teaching of Karl Barth: A New Positive Movement in German Theology," pp. 385-400.

First, Krüger laid the historical groundwork for the theology of crisis. He maintained that the war had triggered a reaction against Ritschlian idealism and relativism. A young generation of scholar-warriors had returned from the misery and despair of war with a longing for substance, for meaning, for revelation. But when they sat at the feet of their theological mentors, they were confronted with historicism. Instead of reviving, it repelled them; instead of refreshing, it chilled them. "That purely relative appraisement of every event in history," wrote Krüger, "was as dust to souls thirsting for the absolute."[11] Krüger proceeded to adumbrate for his American audience the essential features of the theology of crisis. In a very lucid and thoughtful manner, he explained Barth's reliance upon the dialectical method, his paradoxical understanding of the Word of God, his radical rejection of man-centered experiential theology, his extreme doctrine of divine transcendence. Krüger was determined to give the crisis theology a fair and sympathetic hearing. In the end, however, this old-school German liberal could not help but express dismay at the essential features of Barthian thought. He was galled by Barth's dependence upon dialectic and paradox, and the implicit assumption of the crisis theology that "the impossible is possible, and irrationality is the true criterion of religion." Krüger also questioned Barth's utter reliance upon Biblical revelation, asserting that "the exclusiveness which clings to the Bible as the sole source of our religious life" was "a grave danger to that life itself." Finally, Krüger feared that in their haste to posit a "new absolutism," the Barthians would fall back into the "prehistoric" stage and attempt to "cast aside all that has been achieved in the age of historicism!"[12]

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[10] Gustav Krüger, "The 'Theology of Crisis': Remarks on a Recent Movement in German Theology," The Harvard Theological Review, 19 (July, 1926), p. 227.

[11] Ibid., pp. 231-32.

Krüger's article was a significant contribution to America's initial understanding of the theology of crisis. Because of its liberal perspectives, the piece was a palatable introductory taste of the new European movement for liberal readers. Its critique, moreover, would be echoed again and again by American liberals to counter the intrusions of Barthian thought.

The Liberal Response

It seems that Krüger's article primed the pump for indigenous interpretations of the theology of crisis. American religious liberals as well as conservatives quickly developed sharp rebuttals to the dialectical theology promulgated by Karl Barth.[13] Albert C. Knudson, a Boston University personalist, was the earliest and most persistent liberal critic of the Barthian movement. Even before the first English translation of Barth appeared in 1928, Knudson had prepared incisive critiques for the Methodist Review and the Christian Century.[14] The arguments delineated in these articles were reinforced during the early thirties.[15]

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[12] Ibid., pp. 253-56.

[13] The conservative critique was ably initiated in 1926 by F. D. Jenkins, a Presbyterian pastor and Princeton Seminary Instructor. See Jenkins, "Germany's New Paradox Theology," Bibliotheca Sacra, 83 (Oct., 1926), pp. 427-62. Maintaining the long-established Princeton tradition of sarcastic wit and intellectual rigor, Jenkins systematically dismantled the assumption that crisis theology was a return to Reformation thought. He proclaimed that the new movement, by virtue of its anti-rational theological method, was infected by the fallacy of "Agnosticism." (p. 444). Despite Barth's rabid disclaimers, Jenkins was convinced that Barthian thought was not really theology but religious philosophy, "only another attempt in the company with Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, Otto and others. . .to find the religious a priori." (p. 462).

William C. Robinson, a professor at the Southern Presbyterian Seminary in Decatur, Georgia (now Columbia Theological Seminary), was another conservative who sought to keep the Reformers at a safe distance from Karl Barth. He voiced the typical conservative objections that Barth lacked an adequate doctrine of divine inspiration and a satisfactory doctrine of redemption. See Robinson, "The Theology of Karl Barth: A Protest and a Standpoint," The Union Seminary Review (Richmond), 40 (Oct., 1928), pp. 105-122.

Well acquainted with theological developments on the Continent, Knudson had an uncanny capacity for unraveling the subtleties of crisis theology. For instance, he faithfully interpreted enigmatic Barthian concepts like "dialectic," "paradox," "revelation," "faith," "religion," and "crisis." But while Knudson always gave the crisis theology a fair hearing, he invariably concluded his articles with some devastating criticisms. First, he scored Barth for disdaining immanence in favor of a radical doctrine of ontological dualism. By rejecting philosophical immanence, the crisis theologian had discarded "the one vital way that modern mind has of conceiving the relation of God to the world."[16] Second, Knudson objected to Barth's irrational theological method, his "alliance with philosophical positivism or skepticism." Barth had succumbed to a form of "complete metaphysical agnosticism"

A number of other conservatives, however, were willing to overlook Barth's doctrinal weaknesses in order to gain an ally against the religious liberals. Holmes J. Rolston, Jr., a Southern Presbyterian, and Henry Offermann, a Lutheran, wrote quite sympathetic and enthusiastic appraisals of the theology of crisis. See Offermann, "The Theology of Karl Barth: An Orientation," The Lutheran Church Quarterly, 2 (July, 1929), pp. 271-88; and Rolston, "The Barthian Doctrine of the Word of God," The Union Seminary Review (Richmond), 42 (Jan., 1931), pp. 154-79.

[14] Albert C. Knudson, "The Theology of Crisis," The Methodist Review, 111 (May and July, 1928), pp. 329-43, 549-60; and "German Fundamentalism," The Christian Century, 45 (June 14, 1928), pp. 762-65.

[15] Knudson's other articles on Barthian thought included: "Barth: His Strength and His Weakness," Zion's Herald (Boston), 111 (Nov. 22, 1933), pp. 1109, 1128; and "Humanism and Barthianism," Religion in Life, 4 (Winter, 1935), pp. 22-31.

[16] Knudson, "Barth: His Strength and His Weakness," p. 1109.

in which all was "left in mystery and in general intellectual befuddlement." No amount of dialectical magic or "paradoxical hocus-pocus" could conceal "the intellectual scandal" apparent in the crisis theology.[17] Third, Knudson scorned Barth's thoroughgoing Calvinism. A strict predestinarian, Barth had carried his theology back "into the pre-Methodistic era." By preserving an exclusive divine agency, he denied the freedom of the will and thereby destroyed "the possibility of a truly ethical and spiritual life." Such a position, Knudson complained, signalled the end of progressive Christianity and the end of the Social Gospel.[18]

Knudson concluded one exposition by proclaiming that Barthian thought was too one-sided to fulfill the permanent intellectual and religious needs of modern man. The new movement, Knudson predicted in 1935,

> will run its course, and for a time serve an important function as a theological stimulant; but after that it will be laid aside as an interesting and brilliant but temporary revival of theological irrationalism.[19]

Knudson's critique of Barthianism typified the liberal reaction during the late twenties and early thirties. American religious liberals leveled a barrage of studied criticism at European neo-orthodoxy as it began to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

Julius Seeyle Bixler, having returned from amiable visits with the crisis theologians, announced in 1929 that he remained "completely unconvinced" by their arguments. America had been hoping, Bixler mused, that new and compelling religious prophets might have emerged from the horrible suffering and colossal insanity of the Great War. But alas, Bixler moaned, now comes the most important religious movement which Europe has produced since 1918, and what does it offer us?

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[17] Knudson, "The Theology of Crisis," p. 558; "German Fundamentalism," p. 764; and "Humanism and Barthianism," pp. 29-30.

[18] Knudson, "Humanism and Barthianism," p. 30; and "Barth: His Strength and His Weakness," p. 1128.

[19] Knudson, "Humanism and Barthianism," p. 30.

> A return to Calvinism! A return to a theocentrism of a sort most foreign to our ways of thinking. A return to an emphasis on eschatology, to a belief in an infinite chasm between God and man, to the idea of humanity tainted by sin, to predestination, special revelation, an angry God, and a whole array of conceptions from which theology and the philosophy of religion have freed themselves in recent years only by great toil and suffering.[20]

Barthianism proved to be a giant disappointment for Bixler. To this American liberal, it simply marked an inglorious retreat to the acrid orthodoxies of Reformation theology.

John Wright Buckham was equally disturbed by the Calvinistic bent of Barthian theology. In 1933 he wrote that Barth's reversion from immanence to transcendence signalled a return to an "outworn Calvinism which blindly sacrifices all the larger understanding of religion which came in with Schleiermacher and his successors." Furthermore, Buckham scored the Barthian conception of God as ganz andere. Such a notion, he maintained, was "as harsh and repellent" as it was "theologically unbalanced."[21]

Theodore F. Herman expressed a similar concern during the previous year in a marvelous article which posed the question, "Karl Barth: Promise or Peril?" This liberal professor from Lancaster Seminary concluded that Barth's theology constituted an overreaction to certain tendencies which modern theology had inherited from Schleiermacher. As evidence, Herman cited Barth's one-sided stress on the Deus Absconditus and his "pessimistic denial" of all cultural values. In his zeal to emancipate revelation and faith from the relativism of history and psychology, Barth had lifted "the Divine out of all relation to life." Herman did not believe that a theological system which led logically to "a Kantian agnosticism," could have a lasting influence upon the present generation.[22]

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[20] Julius Seeyle Bixler, "Germany's Crisis Theologians," The Christian Century, 46 (June 5, 1929), p. 742.

[21] John Wright Buckham, "Is God Wholly Other?" Zion's Herald, 111 (Sept. 13, 1933), p. 872.

The liberal critique of Barthian thought was normally restrained and reasonable. But there were instances when American liberals reacted emotionally and incredulously when confronted by the strange European movement. One distinguished teacher of theology is reported to have exclaimed of the Barthians, "Why those men are crazy."[23] A minister from Pawtucket, Rhode Island, became so incensed by the doom and pessimism inherent in Barth's theology that he fired off a smoldering article to the Congregationalist. None too subtle in displaying his distaste for the crisis theology, the author entitled his article, "A Sickly Theology for A 'Sick World.'" The agitated minister did not mince words. He announced in the opening sentence: "The Barthian theology is odoriferous."[24]

While most liberals registered their dissatisfaction with the crisis theology in a more delicate manner, their sentiments essentially coincided with those of the vociferous pastor from Pawtucket. Early reaction to Barth was invariably negative. Few liberals climbed aboard the Barthian steamship when it finally docked on the shores of America.

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[22] Theodore F. Herman, "Karl Barth: Promise or Peril?" Religion in Life, 1 (Summer, 1932), p. 405.

[23] Quoted in Harris Franklin Rall, "The Idea of God in Recent Literature," Religion in Life, 1 (Winter, 1932), p. 66.

[24] Ralph O. Harpole, "A Sickly Theology for a 'Sick World,'" The Congregationalist, 115 (Sept. 25, 1930), pp. 407-409.

God Lets Loose Karl Barth

The language barrier delayed and blunted the impact of Barthian thought in this country. For nearly a decade after Karl Barth's commentary on Romans had exploded in Europe, America's knowledge of his theology was limited to secondhand reports and rumors. Not until 1928 did one of Barth's works become available in English. Significantly, American readers were not introduced to Barth's "bombshell," but to *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, a collection of stirring addresses originally published at Munich in 1925.

The man who translated this definitive volume[25] was Douglas Horton, a young minister of the Leyden Congregational Church in Brookline, Massachusetts.[26] In retrospect, Horton hardly loomed as the person most likely to introduce Barth to the religious mainstream of this country. He was not of German extraction, seemingly a prerequisite for other American translators of Barth. He was not even reared in the Confessional tradition which most warmly embraced Barth. While Horton studied before the war at Tübingen, where he evidently became proficient in the German language, there were few other indications that he might later become involved with European neo-orthodoxy.

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[25] Gustav Krüger, while lecturing in America in 1926, had recommended this book for translation because he felt that it contained "the quintessence of Barthian thought." See Werner Petersmann, "The 'Social Gospel' in the 'Theology of Crisis,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *88* (Jan., 1931), p. 16.

[26] Born in 1891, Horton received his A.B. in 1912 from Princeton College, and his B.D. in 1915 from Hartford Theological Seminary, where he prepared for Congregational ordination.

Horton ran across Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie one afternoon in 1926[27] while browsing through the "New Books" shelf at the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, located in Cambridge just a few miles from his Brookline parish. Years later, Horton remembered that providential encounter.

> At first I glanced idly through it for the chapter titles, then found myself reading some of the more arresting paragraphs, and presently succumbed so completely to the spell of its passionate intensity and penetrating faith that I lost track of the passage of time---not to be brought back to myself for two or three hours.

Horton immediately determined that the book should be published in English, and not long after wrote Barth for permission to prepare a translation.[28]

Apparently, Horton was captivated by Barth's essays because of his smoldering disaffection for religious liberalism. He wrote in 1957 that those who remembered the "desiccated humanism" which prevailed in American Protestantism during the early decades of the twentieth century could appreciate the surprise, the joy and the refreshment of reading Barth's book.

> There was undeniable exhilaration in rehearing and relearning that God is God, that he will will what he will will, that he is not caught in the trammels of the world he himself has created, and that man can produce him neither as the conclusion of a syllogism, the Q.E.D. of an experiment, nor the crown of a civilization.[29]

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[27] The exact date of that famous afternoon has not been pin-pointed. According to its accession date, the book was received by Andover-Harvard Library during February, 1926, and Horton most likely discovered it later that year. It is entirely possible, however, that the volume remained on the "New Books" shelf for a number of months, and that Horton first leafed through it during 1927 when he probably began to work on the translation.

[28] Douglas Horton, "Foreword" to Karl Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man, trans. Horton (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 1. He had come to believe that "Providence. . .had a good deal to do with making this the book through which the thought of Karl Barth was first introduced to the readers of English." (Ibid.)

[29] Ibid., pp. 1-2.

Nurtured on the milk of liberalism, Horton admitted that his discovery of Barth was bittersweet, that it produced "an emotional dialectic." To question the notion of divine immanence as boldly as Barth, after all, meant the shaking of an impressive philosophical structure. To see the liberal system begin to totter under Barth's pressure "was to be filled with misgivings, to anticipate crisis."[30]

Despite his misgivings, Horton became an enthusiastic propagator of Barthian ideas during the late twenties. In February, 1928, Horton submitted an article to the Christian Century which served as an effective introduction to his translation of Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie. The title, "God Lets Loose Karl Barth," which served as a warning to American liberals, was the fragment of a quote which Horton borrowed from Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Beware," Emerson had cautioned his generation, "when the Great God lets loose a thinker in this planet. Then all things are at risk. It is as when a conflagration has broken out in a great city and no man knows what is safe and where it will end." Horton informed his readers that a Swiss thinker, Karl Barth, had caused a theological conflagration in Europe.[31]

Horton delineated Barth's thought in the form of a short summary which was punctuated with lively quotations from "a little book called 'The Word of God and Theology'," which according to the article, contained "the foundations of his teaching."[32] Attuned to the concerns of American ministers,

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[30] Ibid., p. 2.

[31] Horton, "God Lets Loose Karl Barth," The Christian Century, 45 (Feb. 16, 1928), p. 204.

[32] Ibid., p. 205. Note that the title of the book was later changed to The Word of God and The Word of Man. It is evident that Horton had not yet polished his translation of the addresses. The quotations used in this article varied somewhat from those which were finally published in the book.

Horton paid special attention to "Pastor Barth's" background of religious socialism as well as his emphasis upon worship. This was probably done to cushion his readers against the radical features of Barth's theism and theological method.

Although Horton later became Dean of the Harvard Divinity School and an important international ecumenist, history will better remember him as the English translator of Barth's Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie. Indeed, one present-day historian maintains that Horton's translation "marks an era in American Christian thought."[33] While such a claim is too extravagant, Horton's place in America's religious history is certainly secure. It is interesting, however, that he never followed up his Christian Century article or his translation with other books and articles pertaining to the theology of crisis.[34] His romance with Barth was intense but brief. Apparently Horton was moved by the temper of Barth's message, but not by the message itself. Despite his prominent role as a Barthian translator, he never became a full-fledged Barthian.

By 1928, American liberals were eager to make direct contact with Karl Barth, "the greatest man since Schleiermacher."[35] Hence, Douglas Horton's translation of Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie was widely reviewed by the religious press.

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[33] Ahlstrom, "Continental Influence," p. 264.

[34] Horton did offer technical assistance to the movement. He translated some articles for Emil Brunner, and helped Brunner and Wilhelm Pauck to smooth out the English in their important interpretations of crisis theology.

[35] Professor Lange, quoted in Horton, "God Lets Loose Karl Barth," p. 205. Horton must have been referring to August Lang (1867-1945), an important Reformation scholar in Germany.

Unprepared for the dynamic power of Barth's message, some reviewers were left shell-shocked by this mini-bombshell. Lewis M. Sweet admitted that reading the book made him feel like he had been "hit squarely between the eyes with a particularly solid mallet wielded by a particularly heavy-handed mallet wielder."[36] One reviewer warned that Barth's book would literally "halt the reader in his tracks" because of its "unusual power of arresting attention."[37] Another was quite amazed by its "religious passion" and "burning conviction."[38]

Most reviewers, noting the power of Barth's book, recounted its message with cautious disapproval. The critic for Boston's Zion's Herald felt that while Barth had presented a "good corrective" for a day when mankind needed to be drawn to the fundamental reality of all existence, he had overemphasized transcendence and underemphasized immanence.[39] One short notice complained that the book signaled "a revival of Calvinism, with a difference," an antiquated theology which was "out of touch with modern science, modern philosophy, modern biblical criticism."[40] Another notice suggested that any person who was in quest of a reasoned faith and refused to be impressed by "brilliant or extravagant paradoxes" would

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[36] Lewis Matthews Sweet, review of The Word of God, The Biblical Review, 14 (April, 1929), p. 283.

[37] "Karl Barth's Book," editorial review, Zion's Herald, 107 (Dec. 26, 1928), p. 1647.

[38] Milton G. Evans, review of The Word of God, The Crozer Quarterly, 6 (April, 1929), p. 247.

[39] Editorial review, "Karl Barth's Book," p. 1647.

[40] Unsigned review of The Word of God, The Anglican Theological Review, 11 (April, 1929), p. 396.

"remain skeptical" upon reading the book.[41]

The most critical review was penned by Oscar L. Joseph for the Methodist Review. Joseph acknowledged Barth's "earnestness and genuine ability" but grumbled that there was no excuse for "the exaggerations and contradictions of his agitated utterances," which were ridiculed as "rhetorical rhapsodies that make more of hysteria than of history." Labeling Barth a "reactionary theologian," Joseph traced his lineage back to "the extreme predestinarianism of Calvin and Jonathan Edwards." Furthermore, because of his extreme emphasis upon divine transcendence, Barth was even likened to "the heretic Marcion." Believing that Barth's thought reflected "the incoherent and inconclusive thinking current since the war," Joseph warned fellow liberals not to cut themselves loose from Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Wernle and Bousset in order to follow Barth's "random speculations."[42]

The most incisive and articulate assessment of The Word of God and the Word of Man was written by Reinhold Niebuhr for the Christian Century. Niebuhr began his review with the observation that the language barrier had isolated this country from recent developments in German theology. With a heavy note of sarcasm, he suggested that this was America's "punishment for the superficiality which creates a market for every casual book of sermons while translations of significant theological treatises are left on the shelves." Niebuhr applauded Horton's service to the American church and wished the book such booming sales that other translators might be encouraged.[43]

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[41] Unsigned review of The Word of God, The Journal of Religion, 9 (July, 1929), p. 498.

[42] Oscar L. Joseph, review of The Word of God, The Methodist Review, 112 (May, 1929), pp. 469-70.

The reviewer aligned himself throughout with Barth's critique of religious liberalism. Barth's absolutism was a needed correction to the relativism and subjectivism of modern religious thought. The Swiss theologian was praised, moreover, for reintroducing a sense of tragedy in religion, "a wholesome antidote to the superficial optimism of most current theology." In contrast to an insipid liberalism which could degenerate into little more than "a sentimental glow upon thought and life," Barthian theology had "the note of reality in it."[44]

At this point, however, Niebuhr disengaged himself from Barth. While admitting that Barth had defeated relativism, he felt that the crisis theologian had paid a moral price which was too high. Niebuhr believed that this Apostle of the Absolute had severed the nerve of responsible social Christianity. Barth showed more concern for "the problem of his inner life than with the effort to protect and advance moral values in society." Acknowledging that there was more religious vitality and moral sensitivity in Barthian pessimism than in "the easy optimism of evolutionary moralism," Niebuhr considered it a tragedy that this moral concern could not be created without "tempting the soul to despair of history and take a flight into the absolute."[45]

Niebuhr's article was a preview of his lifelong Barthian critique. Although he agreed with the critical focus of Barth's theology, Niebuhr would always maintain that it had abdicated the social dynamic of Christianity. He would never be able to condone Barth's "flight into the absolute."

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[43] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Barth---Apostle of the Absolute," The Christian Century, 45 (Dec. 13, 1928), p. 1523.

[44] Ibid., pp. 1523-24.

[45] Ibid., p. 1524.

The hope, expressed by Niebuhr, that Horton's translation of Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie would create a translator's market was not immediately fulfilled. Horton did not get rich from the book, and another five years were to pass before other major works of Barth were published in English. During 1933, however, the logjam was truly broken as three separate books reached the English market. Der Römerbrief finally broke through the translation barrier due to the efforts of Edwyn C. Hoskyns and Oxford University Press. A translation of the sixth German edition of the 1919 bombshell, The Epistle to the Romans, was too late and too forbidding (537 pages) to have much of an impact in America. Another Englishman, H. J. Stenning, translated Die Auferstehung der Toten (1924), Barth's controversial commentary on I Corinthians, Chapter 15, under the English title, The Resurrection of the Dead. Finally during 1933, a volume of sermons by Barth and Thurneysen, Komm Schöpfer Geist! (1924), was translated by three German Reformed minister-theologians, George W. Richards, president of the Reformed Seminary at Lancaster, Karl J. Ernst, professor at Mission House Seminary in Plymouth, Wisconsin, and Elmer G. Homrighausen, pastor of a Reformed church in Indianapolis. The publication of Come Holy Spirit proved so successful that the same trio prepared another volume of sermons by Barth and Thurneysen, Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr Leben! (1928), which appeared two years later as God's Search for Man. And in 1936, Homrighausen and Ernst teamed up to translate some of Barth's most important addresses, which they entitled God in Action.[46]

By the mid-thirties, therefore, Barth had become fairly accessible in this country. While Horton's translation had the most immediate impact upon American theology, each of the succeeding publications helped religious liberals (and conservatives) to define themselves over against the radical European movement. God, with a little help from his translating friends, had let loose Karl Barth!

Emil Brunner: Missionary from Zurich

Barth persistently denied that he had founded a new system of religious thought. He insisted that his theology was simply a "corrective," a "marginal note," a "gloss," or a "pinch of spice" which was stimulated by the "need and promise of Christian preaching."[47] Such a perception of his theological task led Barth to scoff at suggestions that there was a Barthian "school." Certainly, he would argue, there was a group of like-minded thinkers (including Barth, Gogarten, Merz, Thurneysen) who shared a common interest in crisis theology, but this loose association hardly revolved around one individual. Diversity reigned; conflicts flared.

Despite Barth's disclaimers, however, it must be pointed out that he did emerge as the giant of European neo-orthodoxy. Barth was the movement's thunderbolt and lightning. With his creative and combustible mind, it was inevitable that the theology of crisis would become synonymous with "Barthianism," especially in America where the subtle differences among crisis theologians seemed relatively minor and insignificant. The entire movement appeared to be a monolithic blur of Barthian thought.

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[46] A few of Barth's pamphlets and sermons appeared in English before 1936. See The Christian Life, two sermons on Romans 12: 1-3, translated by J. Strathearn McNab in 1930; and Theological Existence Today!, the famous plea for theological freedom against the Nazi's attempt to dominate the German church, translated by R. Birch Hoyle in 1933. McNab also translated Barth's important Credo in 1936.

[47] Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man, trans. Douglas Horton (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1928), pp. 98, 100.

The only other crisis theologian to escape somewhat from the shadow of Barth was Emil Brunner, a professor of theology from Zurich. Because of his knowledge of American theology, his facility with English, and his various visits to the United States, Brunner was an effective missionary for European neo-orthodoxy. It was he who did the most to elucidate Barth's bombastic thought for confused American theologians.

Brunner's experience as a Fellow at Union Seminary immediately following the war helped him to understand the peculiarities of religious thought in this country. Moreover, his initial knowledge of American theology was constantly updated through letters and meetings with American students in Europe. Prompted by his long-standing interest in this country, Brunner accepted an offer from his friend, George W. Richards, president of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in the United States at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to deliver the Seminary's Swander Lectures in the autumn of 1928. Published during the following year as The Theology of Crisis, these lectures reached a wide American audience and became a popular handbook of the European movement.

Well aware of the practical bent of American religion, Brunner introduced his lectures with a long and somewhat tortured defense of the necessity for Christian theology. He scolded those theologians who proclaimed that there were more urgent and important tasks for the contemporary Christian. "Theology," insisted Brunner, "has for its very problem the understanding of human life." Those who spurned theology were like gardeners who thought the branches of a tree more important than the sap because the branches were visible and the sap invisible. In the end it was fruitless, confusing and fatal "to separate practical questions from the belief which makes them practical." Brunner contended, therefore, that his lectures addressed exceedingly practical problems: distinguishing between the Christian and the idealistic or naturalistic understanding of life, pointing out the true meaning of Christianity, and demonstrating that these two practical and decisive problems overshadowed all others in importance.[48]

The first and most basic of the five lectures placed the theology of crisis in proper historical perspective. The new movement was portrayed as a desperately needed corrective to liberalism's disastrous attempt to harmonize the Christian faith with the modern mind. The succeeding addresses delineated the differences between liberalism and crisis theology on the crucial issues of revelation, sin and salvation, Christian ethics, and the Kingdom of God. While the lectures did not comprise a thorough examination of the theology of crisis, they did answer many of the questions which American theologians had been raising about the movement.

The professor from Zurich was warmly received at Lancaster. George Richards later rejoiced that Santee Hall had been filled with ministers and laymen who were "completely captivated by straight theological lectures for five successive hours." Brunner proved to be a fascinating lecturer who surprised his audience with his ability to speak English with clarity and accuracy. His slight accent was hardly a barrier to effective communication for it was "more like that of a Scotchman [sic] than of a German." Noting that they were the most significant lectures of his life, Richards reported that it was impossible to remain unaffected. Whether the listener was a fundamentalist or a modernist, it was necessary to dig more deeply to hold his ground against Brunner, or else become a convert to his doctrines. Compromise or armistice was out of the question, declared Richards. "One must be either with the lecturer or against him."[49]

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[48] Brunner, The Theology of Crisis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), pp. xxi, xxiii.

Brunner repeated a number of the Swander Lectures at various schools of theology before returning to Switzerland. In a whirlwind tour of the northeastern section of the United States, he spoke at Central Seminary (Reformed Church in the United States) in Dayton, Western Seminary in Pittsburgh, Princeton Seminary, Harvard Divinity School and Union Seminary in New York. These stops afforded Brunner the opportunity to acquaint American theologians with the subtleties of contemporary European thought.

The subsequent publication of the lectures was hailed by reviewers as a brilliant introduction to Barthian theology. Writing for the Christian Century, Wilhelm Pauck heralded the appearance of The Theology of Crisis as an "important event," and praised Brunner as "the most systematic and clearest thinker" of the new movement.[50] A sympathetic conservative, who likened Brunner to the first missionary to appear in a non-Christian land, thanked Brunner for his vital contribution to America's understanding of the crisis theology. "We wish," concluded Holmes Rolston, "that he would write more in English or that we could read German."[51]

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[49] George W. Richards, "The Opening of the Seminary," The Reformed Church Messenger, 101 (Oct. 18, 1928), p. 2.

[50] Pauck, "The Gospel According to Karl Barth," The Christian Century, 47 (March 5, 1930), pp. 304-305. Brunner, who radically disagreed with Barth on some vital issues, must have been dumbfounded by the caption of this review article.

Despite Brunner's missionary journey to "a non-Christian land," most of the pagans remained skeptical about the theology of crisis. Julius Seeyle Bixler, like other liberals, refused to be won over by Brunner's Scottish accent. He complained in 1929 that the ideas which were promulgated by the crisis theologians were rationally meaningless for modern man. By introducing such conceptions as "original sin, an angry God, and the qualitative difference between time and eternity," the Barthians had shut themselves off from the contemporary mind. "Perhaps the fault is with the modern age and not with these theologians," wrote the perplexed liberal. "That is their claim, but they have not as yet made it convincing."[52]

Adolf Keller: Barthian Ecumenist

Adolf Keller was another Zurich professor who helped to propagate the gospel of Barth in America. A former European representative to the Federal Council of Churches who frequently visited this country, Keller had a unique opportunity to familiarize American liberals with the religious situation in Europe.[53] In 1927, he teamed up with George Stewart, minister of New York's

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[51] Holmes J. Rolston, a review of The Theology of Crisis, The Union Seminary Review (Richmond), 41 (April, 1930), pp. 315-17. It should be noted that a number of Brunner's books soon began to appear in English translations. The Word and the World (1931), The Mediator (1934) and The Divine Imperative (1937). Most Americans found Brunner's theology more palatable than Barth's.

[52] Bixler, "Emil Brunner as a Representative of the Theology of Crisis," The Journal of Religion, 9 (July, 1929), pp. 458-59.

[53] See Luther A. Weigle, "Introduction" to Adolf Keller, Karl Barth and Christian Unity: The Influence of the Barthian Movement Upon the Churches of the World, trans. Werner Petersmann and Manfred Manrodt (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1933), pp. vii-ix.

Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, to produce _Protestant Europe: Its Crisis and Outlook_, which devoted considerable space to the impact of crisis theology upon European religious thought.[54]

Keller's most significant contribution to America's understanding of European neo-orthodoxy was _Karl Barth and Christian Unity_, a 1933 translation of _Der Weg der dialektischen Theologie durch die kirchliche Welt_ (1931). Essentially an examination of Barth's influence upon the Protestant churches of Europe and North America, the book concluded that Barthianism could become the theological stimulus for a new worldwide ecumenical movement.[55]

The ecumenical warrior continued to explicate the Barthian movement when he delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary in November, 1933. These addresses, later published as _Religion and Revolution_, described the religious upheaval which had taken place in Europe since the war. Liberalism had been assaulted and replaced by a Reformation-oriented theology of crisis. Keller believed that American Protestantism was ripe for a similar upheaval. Wherever there were "political and social conflicts, the restlessness of the human soul, the chaotic conditions of human relations, the uncertainty of the Christian conscience," the seeds for a theological revolution were being sown.[56]

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[54] See "The Changing Theological Front," in Adolf Keller and George Stewart, _Protestant Europe: Its Crisis and Outlook_ (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927), pp. 139-56.

[55] Keller, _Karl Barth and Christian Unity_, pp. 260-316.

[56] Keller, _Religion and Revolution: Problems of Contemporary Christianity on the European Scene_ (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1934), pp. 8-9. Douglas Horton and Wilhelm Pauck helped to prepare the Stone Lectures for publication.

Paul Tillich: Crisis Theology with a Difference

Paul Tillich's remarkable influence upon American theology began in 1932, when H. Richard Niebuhr translated and introduced an English edition of *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, a brilliant analysis of the post-war cultural crisis in Europe. While he was never an enthusiastic exponent of Barthianism, Tillich was obviously affected by the temper of the movement when *The Religious Situation* was written in 1926. This small but difficult treatise reverberated with the dominant themes of crisis theology.

Aware that American readers would be dazed by the subtleties of Tillich's writing, Niebuhr wrote a long "Translator's Preface" which provided steppingstones to the author's ideas and terminology. First, he explained that the title of the book might be misleading. The treatise was not about the religion of the churches, or even Christian theology, but "an effort to interpret the whole contemporary situation from the point of view of one who constantly inquires what fundamental faith is expressed in the forms which civilization takes." And what was the "contemporary situation?" The author was convinced that modern civilization had collapsed and needed to be restructured. And because more was at stake than the discovery of new political or economic organizations, Tillich's book constituted a profound attempt to discover where civilization stood and to ascertain whether there were "creative forces at work in the catastrophes of the time."[57]

Niebuhr related the essential features of Tillich's thought. Modern civilization, according to Tillich, was controlled and supported by a trinity of powers which reinforced each other---natural science, technique and capitalistic economy. The spirit of this self-confident age was expressed in painting, sculpture, education, politics and religion. Human autonomy and human domination functioned as the fundamental motifs of modern faith. However, doubts about the spirit of modern culture, long raised by individual prophets, were accentuated and reinforced by the shocks of the war and the secular revolution. Thus, a new attitude, a new religious situation, was emerging. Tillich called the new attitude "belief-ful realism" which, in contrast to the belief-ful idealism of modern faith, did not spiritualize objects or regard them as significant in and of themselves. "Belief-ful realism" was a skeptical, unromantic, unsentimental attitude which accepted the starkly realistic world as yet "symbolic of the eternal and unconditioned source of all meaning and ground of all being."[58]

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[57] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Translator's Preface" to Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation* (New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1932), pp. vii-viii.

Niebuhr especially commended Tillich's attempt to merge radical theology with radical social ethics. While other crisis theologians appeared to support the status quo because reforms could not alter the basic fallenness of man, Tillich continued to assert the "radical consequences of the religious position." Despite Tillich's rejection of liberalism's "naive faith in progress" and "thoroughly humanistic and anthropocentric religious attitude," he was still fundamentally committed to a responsible "social gospel." Niebuhr concluded that such a point of view would be very helpful in America's inevitable search for "a new theology and a radical ethics of the Christian life."[59]

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[58] Ibid., pp. xi-xii.

[59] Ibid., pp. xx-xxi.

American reviewers generally recognized the profound significance of Tillich's little book. One critic, for instance, announced that its importance was "in inverse ratio to its size."[60] But only Reinhold Niebuhr, the translator's brother, warmly embraced the prognosis as well as the prescription advanced by the professor from Frankfurt. Niebuhr fully endorsed "the profundities of insight" unveiled by Tillich's analysis of the contemporary religious situation. He was certain, however, that the work would be pronounced meaningless by American liberals who were still "too thoroughly immersed in the illusions of liberal, middle-class culture" to absorb anything more than "a merely political or superficially rationalistic interpretation of the realities of our decaying civilization and culture."[61]

A review by Stewart G. Cole of Crozer Seminary substantiated Reinhold Niebuhr's assessment of the liberal reaction to Tillich's book. Using the best (or worst) Tillichian terminology, Cole proclaimed that he remained unconvinced that it was necessary "to hypothecate the transcendentally unconditioned and its possible camaraderie with man in order to provide a rational way out of our cultural morass."[62] If they understood him, most American liberals probably agreed with Cole's critique of The Religious Situation. Even Paul Tillich, quite un-Barthian in most respects, was too imbued with the temper of crisis theology to be welcomed into the strongholds of religious liberalism.

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[60] Stewart G. Cole, "Our Contemporary Religious Situation," The Journal of Religion, 13 (July, 1933), p. 349.

[61] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Eternity and Our Time," The World Tomorrow, 15 (Dec. 21, 1932), p. 596.

[62] Cole, "Our Contemporary Religious Situation," p. 349.

Wilhelm Pauck: Reluctant Advocate

By the mid-thirties, the gospel of Karl Barth had been quite thoroughly announced in this country. The stream of introductory lectures, interpretive articles, English translations and critical reviews which were published in America from 1925-1935 had swollen into an impressive Barthian library. A November, 1933, issue of the Boston-based Methodist weekly, Zion's Herald, which was devoted almost exclusively to the theology of crisis, included two large pages of advertisements for books and articles related to the European movement.[63] Barthianism was no longer an enigma.

America's understanding of European neo-orthodoxy was significantly deepened when major critiques of Barthian thought were published during the early thirties. Since the crisis theology echoed Reformation themes, it was not surprising that the first book-length interpretation of the movement was written by an orthodox Calvinist, Alvin Sylvester Zerbe, Professor Emeritus of the Central Theological Seminary (Reformed Church in the United States) in Dayton, Ohio. In 1930, Zerbe produced The Karl Barth Theology or The New Transcendentalism,[64] an extremely critical assessment of the philosophical bases of the crisis theology. The ambitious octogenarian claimed to have digested over one hundred books and pamphlets on Barthianism before he wrote this exposition, but as one observer caustically noted, Zerbe had not "earned the right to be so critical of Barth because he has not understood him." The undistinguished book served to show how difficult it was "for an American Fundamentalist to get inside the Theology of the Word."[65] Zerbe's interpretation had little impact upon the broad spectrum of American theology, but it did prefigure most of the anti-Barthian arguments which were to become standard fare among religious conservatives.[66]

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[63] See Zion's Herald, 111 (Nov. 22, 1933), pp. 1120-21.

[64] Alvin Sylvester Zerbe, The Karl Barth Theology: or, the New Transcendentalism, Cleveland: Central Publishing Co., 1930. The title was obviously misleading. Zerbe surely meant New Transcendent-ism.

While a number of excellent British expositions of Barthian thought were also published in this country during the early thirties,[67] most American theologians relied upon the critiques of Wilhelm Pauck and Walter Lowrie for their basic understanding of the theology of crisis. These two thinkers helped religious liberals, especially, to get "inside" the Barthian movement.

The first significant study of Barth to be published in this country was written by Wilhelm Pauck, a church historian, who had been reared and educated in Germany. Pauck immigrated to America in 1926 following his appointment to the faculty of Chicago Theological Seminary where he had spent the previous year as a post-doctoral scholar. The young professor had received his degree from the University of Berlin where he encountered some of the finest minds in Europe. His mentors there included Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch who inculcated a deep strain of liberalism, and Karl Holl who stimulated a lifelong interest in the Reformation. Pauck also spent a year at the University of Göttingen (1922-23) where he met Karl Barth who had just arrived from Switzerland. Barth impressed Pauck as personally attractive and stimulating, but his commentary on Romans was much too radical for the liberal student.[68]

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[65] John McConnachie, The Barthian Theology and the Man of To-day (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933), p. 321.

[66] See, for example, Cornelius Van Til, The New Modernism; An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner, Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1946; and Carl F. H. Henry, Fifty Years of Protestant Theology, Boston: W. A. Wilde Co., 1950. Not all American conservatives thought that the crisis theology was a "new modernism." Holmes J. Rolston praised the Barthians for renovating the true principles of Reformation theology and for laying such heavy stress upon divine revelation. See his delightfully clear exposition, A Conservative Looks to Barth and Brunner: An Interpretation of Barthian Theology, Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1933.

[67] R. Birch Hoyle and John McConnachie, two Scotsmen, were the primary British interpreters of Barth. See Hoyle, The Teaching of Karl Barth, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930, an able but uninspired exposition; and McConnachie, The Significance of Karl Barth, New York: Richard R. Smith, 1931, and The Barthian Theology and the Man of To-Day, 1933. Both of McConnachie's books sparkle with the sympathy and excitement of a "true believer."

Possessing firsthand knowledge of Barth and acquainted with the religious situation in Europe as well as America, Pauck was in a unique position to interpret Barthian thought for his adopted countrymen. While he had written a penetrating essay on Barth's theology in 1928,[69] Pauck did not contribute a comprehensive study until 1931 when _Karl Barth: Prophet of a New Christianity?_ was published.[70]

Certainly the most arresting analysis of Barth which was written during the early thirties, the book was also a fascinating testimony to the author's own existential encounter with the theology of crisis. Pauck confessed in the Preface that an "inner struggle" had accompanied the writing of Karl Barth, and Edwin Ewart Aubrey, a colleague at Chicago Theological Seminary, wrote later that those who were close to the author could verify "how very genuine that struggle was."[71]

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[68] Marion Hausner Pauck, "Wilhelm Pauck: A Biographical Essay," in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., _Interpreters of Luther: Essays in Honor of Wilhelm Pauck_ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 338-45.

[69] See Pauck, "Barth's Religious Criticism of Religion," _The Journal of Religion_, _8_ (July, 1928), pp. 453-74. Most of Pauck's later criticisms of Barth were adumbrated in this article.

[70] The misleading subtitle always embarrassed Pauck. Barth was not the prophet of a new Christianity, but "the prophet of a new 'orthodoxy.'" Pauck, _Karl Barth_, p. 40. The publishers insisted upon the title, however, and Pauck acquiesced. See Marion Hausner Pauck, "Wilhelm Pauck," footnote 14, p. 361.

Pauck's wrestle with Barth produced a rather schizoid book. In the first half of the study, Pauck seemed genuinely hopeful that Barth was a modern-day Moses who would lead the church out of the wilderness of despair and uncertainty. He enthusiastically embraced Barth's searing critique of contemporary liberalism. Through gradual accretions of rationalism and idealism, modern theology had been transformed into a desiccated humanism which was devoid of supernatural power and authority. Echoing Barth, Pauck proclaimed that the very concept of divine revelation had been eviscerated by liberal Protestantism. Theological development from Schleiermacher to Troeltsch indicated that the modern world-view had "progressively forced the unique content of traditional Christianity into oblivion."[72]

This Barthian-flavored assessment of the contemporary crisis of belief provided a rousing introduction to the emergence of crisis theology. After acquainting his American readers with Barth's educational background, pastoral experiences and early writings, Pauck focused upon Der Römerbrief, the clarion call of the new movement. In one excited passage, Pauck recaptured the joy of discovery which Barth transmitted in the first edition of this earthshaking book:

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[71] Pauck, Karl Barth, p. v., and Edwin Ewart Aubrey, review of Karl Barth, The Chicago Theological Seminary Register, 22 (Jan., 1932), p. 54.

[72] Pauck, Karl Barth, p. 39, 3-40 passim.

> Forgotten is the emphasis on religious experience, religious individualism, and historical relativism, the voice of conscience---and all the authorities upon which Barth had formerly based his belief and theology. . . . Human motives, intentions, experiences, personalities and individualities---every type of subjectivity become insignificant. They are illusions in the face of the one and only reality: God. This is the new discovery. This is the beginning of the new theology which has drawn the attention of the entire Christian world to itself.[73]

Obviously captivated by the "strange power" in Barth's "untheological theological commentary," Pauck proceeded with a sympathetic assessment of the religious movement it spawned. Even as he unraveled the complex subtleties of the crisis theology, Pauck commended Barthianism to his American readers. In a delicate but positive manner, he explicated many of the objectionable elements of Barth's theology---his dialectical method, his anti-subjectivism, his biblicism, his radical dualism.[74] It was the cautious critique of a cautious advocate.

Throughout the first five chapters, Pauck seemed hopeful that Barth was the long-awaited prophet of "a new era in Protestantism," a prophet who would recognize the value of modern thought, yet return to the "strong religious faith of the Reformers," a prophet who would bridge "the gap between modernism and orthodoxy," a prophet who would fulfill the world's longing for "a new consciousness of God" and "a new realization of God's revelation."[75] At the midpoint of the book, however, the author abruptly and mysteriously shifted his sympathies. Pauck was no longer "with" Barth---emotionally or intellectually. Writing from a safe critical distance, he began to register serious criticisms of Barth's theology.

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[73] Ibid., p. 55.

[74] Ibid., pp. 62, 93-101, 115-16.

[75] Ibid., p. 62.

The about-face was striking. The sudden change of perspective stands out in bold relief as one moves from the fifth to the sixth chapters. Since writers strive for consistency throughout a work, it is very unusual to see tracks uncovered. Generally, the original sections of a book are rewritten to conform with the concluding sections. Aubrey, who observed the evolution of the entire study, verified that Pauck "changed his mind about Barthian theology" while writing the book. But he was grateful that Pauck did not rewrite the earlier part to conform to the latter. "That would have made the book more consistent, but not nearly so helpful." As the book stood, it represented "an honest struggle with an attractive point of view that failed to satisfy."[76] Marion Hausner Pauck made the same point years later when she indicated that her husband "undertook a defense of Barth to show that Barth's criticism of liberal Protestantism was largely correct." Eventually, however, he realized that Barth had slighted historical criticism, and "what started out as a defense of neo-orthodoxy ended as a rejection."[77]

The last half of the book, then, was littered with basic criticisms of Barth's theology. For instance, Pauck questioned Barth's insistence upon the infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity. The logic of such an emphasis, he warned, led to a point in which it was impossible even to speak of God. Furthermore, such a principle disallowed the creative quality of belief in which God becomes immanent in the faith-process. Barth seemed to be engaged in "a vain struggle against windmills."[78]

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[76] Aubrey, review of Karl Barth, p. 54.

[77] Marion Hausner Pauck, "Wilhelm Pauck," p. 349.

[78] Pauck, Karl Barth, pp. 157, 155.

Pauck likewise scored Barth's "antiquated, outlived, unreal" doctrine of divine revelation. He accused Barth of relying upon "the old-supernaturalism, the old belief in the miraculous intervention of an otherworldly, superhuman, anthropomorphic God." While Pauck agreed that a re-emphasis upon the concept of revelation was a positive outgrowth of the post-war theology, he insisted that a recovery of the meaning of Christianity was not to be identical with the recovery of the facts upon which the faith was built. "A new understanding of the significance of the idea of revelation does not necessarily imply an acceptance of the so-called facts of revelation."[79]

Pauck feared that the Swiss theologian had returned "to the narrow channels of ecclesiastical tradition." He was particularly agitated by Barth's vain attempt to resuscitate the outmoded doctrine of the Trinity. "As if it were really a matter of life and death," Pauck noted sardonically, "that as members of the church of the Twentieth Century---we should accept the dogma of the Trinity!" The great promise of the crisis theology was being spent on theological hair splitting. This vigorous plant, grown in the fertile soil of the twentieth century, had not been permitted to blossom because it had been cultivated on "the barren, exhausted field of theological scholasticism."[80]

Pauck concluded that Barthianism was "an almost intolerable theological skeleton-dance" which would end in a restoration of dogmatic orthodoxy. While Barth's critique of liberal theology could hardly be refuted, his reactionary theology was arid and unproductive. "We cannot go back behind

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[79] Ibid., pp. 165-67.

[80] Ibid., pp. 170, 189.

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Troeltsch, Harnack, Ritschl and Schleiermacher," Pauck insisted. "We can only go beyond them."[81] Pauck accepted Barth the protester, the fiery critic of modern theology, but he rejected Barth the dogmatist, the system builder who veered too far in the direction of Christian traditionalism.

In the end, Pauck resolved his "inner struggle" by deciding against the theology of Karl Barth. The question posed by the title of the book was decisively answered on the final page.

> Barth is not _the_ prophet of a new Christianity. He is the "preacher in the wilderness." His voice rings in our ears, and we will not forget his message, but we must wait for another.[82]

American liberals generally applauded Pauck's interpretation of the Barthian movement. Despite the fact that he had endorsed Barth's searing critique of liberal theology, most of the reviewers assumed that Pauck wrote from a "liberal standpoint."[83] It was almost unanimously agreed, therefore, that this was the authoritative book on the new European movement. Many reviewers simply parroted the stinging criticisms of Barth which had been enunciated by Pauck. For instance, Gregory Vlastos, writing for the _Christian Century_, reiterated the criticism that Barth had loaded his theology with "obsolete categories."[84] And Edwin Aubrey, remembering the arid scholasticism which evolved from Luther's vibrant protest, warned of Barth's move toward orthodoxy. "We see here the danger of a protester becoming a systematizer."[85]

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[81] _Ibid._, p. 212, 220.

[82] _Ibid._, p. 220.

[83] H. W. Tribble, review of _Karl Barth_, _Review and Expositor_, _29_ (Jan., 1932), p. 118.

[84] Gregory Vlastos, "Karl Barth, Prophet and Dogmatist," _The Christian Century_, _49_ (Jan. 6, 1932), p. 20.

[85] Aubrey, review of _Karl Barth_, p. 53.

Some liberal reviewers, however, used Pauck's assessment as a springboard to more drastic critiques. Henry Nelson Wieman vehemently condemned Barth's anti-rationalism. By rejecting the rational approach to theology, wrote Wieman, Barth had made it inevitable that all the subjectivism which he drove out the front door would come trooping in through the rear door. "The house, swept and garnished, now has in it more devils of subjectivism than ever before." Barth's struggle to protect God from the access of human reason had ended in vain. "Subjectivism, traditionalism, and dogmatism have swallowed him up. His noble undertaking becomes a fiasco."[86] Harold Buschman, editor of the New Humanist, was convinced that Barth sounded "more like a spiritualistic medium than a twentieth-century thinker." He was certain, moreover, that Barthianism with its "dead weight of traditionalism and its uncritical assumptions, narrowly rooted in the Reformation and the Pauline periods," would not supply "the chief stones in the foundations of the future religious life of America."[87]

Despite his criticism of Barth, Wilhelm Pauck was an effective advertising agent for Barthian theology in America. He persistently proclaimed that "Karl Barth Must be Heard" and contributed mightily to that end with a crucial book and a number of incisive articles.[88] Because of these incessant promulgating efforts, Pauck might be described as an advocate, however reluctant, of the theology of crisis.

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[86] Henry Nelson Wieman, "God and Karl Barth," The Journal of Religion, 12 (July, 1932), pp. 411-12.

[87] Harold Buschman, review of Karl Barth, The New Humanist, 5 (Nov.-Dec., 1932), pp. 40-41.

[88] See Pauck, "Karl Barth Must Be Heard," Religion in Life, 2 (Autumn, 1933), pp. 493-98; "What is 'Barthianism'?" Zion's Herald, 111 (Nov. 22, 1933), pp. 112, 128; and "The Character of the Barthian Theology," Unity, 112 (Jan. 22, 1934), pp. 174-75.

Walter Lowrie: An American Advocate

Walter Lowrie was anything but a reluctant advocate of the theology of crisis. A year after Pauck's schizoid book was published, Lowrie submitted a thoroughly favorable interpretation of the Barthian movement, which was strapped with the forbiddingly long title, *Our Concern with the Theology of Crisis, the Fundamental Aspects of the Dialectical Theology Associated with the Name of Karl Barth, Appreciatively Presented with the Query Whether It Be Not Our Only Positive Possibility, the Crisis of Society and of the Church Understood as the Crisis of the Individual before God*.

Like Pauck, Lowrie was well acquainted with theological developments in Europe. Upon graduation from Princeton Seminary in 1890, Lowrie had spent a number of years studying in Germany where he met Harnack and came under the influence of German liberalism at the height of its power and prestige. Ordained into the Episcopal ministry, Lowrie was able to return to Europe, serving from 1907-1930 as the rector of St. Paul's American Church in Rome where he wrote a number of books which were suffused with the liberal spirit.[89] Soon after the war, however, Lowrie became fascinated by the theology of crisis which was reverberating throughout Europe, and just before his return to America he prepared *Religion or Faith*, a volume which was strongly influenced by Barthian concepts.[90]

Our Concern was a volume of lectures which had been delivered in 1932 on the Bohlen Foundation (Episcopal) at Philadelphia, and to the "School of the Prophets" at Kanuga Lake, North Carolina. Lowrie was aware that a number of interpretations of the Barthian movement had been previously made available for English consumption,[91] but he was convinced that a sympathetic treatment of crisis theology was needed to prepare the way for those writers "bold enough to speak this new language." Moreover, Lowrie was utterly confident of his ability to lay bare the essence of Barthian thought. Admitting that it would be impossible for a single book to relate all there was to know about the dialectical theology, Lowrie was "bold enough to believe" that his small compass would "state the whole of it."[92]

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[89] See Walter Lowrie, Autobiographical Sketch, Vol. II, Lowrie Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University (undated manuscript), pp. 72, 189. For a compilation of Lowrie's prolific and diversified writings, see "Bibliography," in Alexander C. Zabriskie, ed., *Dr. Lowrie of Princeton and Rome: Nine Essays in Acknowledgement of a Debt* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1957), pp. 233-41.

[90] Lowrie, *Religion or Faith*, Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1930.

No "inner struggle" concerning theological allegiance accompanied this study of Barth. The book was unabashedly pro-Barthian. Lowrie disavowed any pretensions of neutrality in the preface where he proclaimed that he wished "to ingratiate the reader's interest and to win his sympathy for the Theology of Crisis."[93] Hardly a detached observer of the theological battleground, Lowrie desired to win converts for the new movement. Like all effective evangelists, he sought the existential involvement of his readers. He personalized the contemporary crisis of belief in an effort to secure an either/or decision. At one key point, Lowrie even informed the readers of this intention. "I have sought importunately to press it upon you as your crisis,---to wrench you out of the superior and secure position of a spectator."[94]

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[91] He noted five in the Preface: Brunner, The Theology of Crisis; Hoyle, The Teaching of Karl Barth; Pauck, Karl Barth; McConnachie, The Significance of Karl Barth; and J. Arundel Chapman, The Theology of Karl Barth, London: Epworth Press, 1931, a short introductory pamphlet. Lowrie, Our Concern With the Theology of Crisis (Boston: Meador, 1932), footnote 1, p. 9.

[92] Lowrie, Our Concern, pp. 11, 13.

[93] Ibid., p. 12.

[94] Ibid., p. 49.

The introductory chapter was by far the most significant section of the book. Lowrie squeezed the basic elements of his entire critique into this compact segment. It began with a fascinating ploy. In order to present a distinct focus of Barthian thought for his American readers, Lowrie decided to compare crisis theology with the reigning assumptions of liberal theology. He did this by composing a thirty-article "common creed" which he claimed would be generally acceptable in Protestant Christendom. Lowrie sardonically argued that the modernist creeds which emerged from the conferences at Lausanne or Jerusalem could have been employed equally as well; that is, if he did not "shrink from criticizing in the name of Barth, documents which are accounted so sacred."[95]

The "common creed" was actually a collection of stereotyped notions about the liberal theology that was being assailed by the Barthians. Because of its wooden nature, this bogus statement served as an effective caricature of liberalism. The temper of this "straw creed" was especially apparent in a number of its misleading articles.

> . . .We still envisage the moral task in the figurative terms which Jesus proposed as a (10) "building up of the Kingdom of God," which we understand as (11) the realization of a perfect human society, having no doubt that (12) man is equal to such a task, (13) because man is inherently a child of God and therefore essentially good. We cannot ignore the fact that this great end is (14) more remote than Jesus seems to have conceived, and that the chief obstacle is something that used to be called sin. But we are confident that (15) at the long last the evolutionary process will eliminate (16) this organic defect of our brute inheritance. . . . Jesus purified religion by teaching us to see (20) that God is our Father, and therefore can be approached without fear and without the sense of aweful [sic] distance.

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[95] Ibid., p. 29. Despite this supercilious comment, Lowrie claimed that the "common creed" represented his own liberal beliefs at one time or another during the previous forty-two years (p. 28).

> (21) For God is essentially near, immanent in this world, and therefore discernible in it---(22) but especially in the depths of the human heart, in a more or less mystical experience. (23) Experience is therefore the foundation of faith. . . .[96]

Such a creed obviously served as a perfect foil for Barthian thought, for indeed, it was the "polar opposite" of what the crisis theologians believed. Lowrie ticked off the list of articles citing Barthian counterpoints. With respect to articles 10-16, for instance, the Scriptures nowhere implied that man was expected to build, or to help build the Kingdom of God. The assumption that the Kingdom was "equivalent to social reform, culture, civilization, progress" had been learned from Ritschl and not from the Bible. It was an illusion to believe that man could realize the ideal of a perfect society. The war had obliterated such a naive notion. Indeed, the belief that man was essentially good could only be maintained through "heroic obstinancy." The Kingdom of God was no nearer in 1932 than in the time of Jesus. An evolutionary conception of the Kingdom, moreover, was a modern notion unknown to the Biblical writers. For that reason, if for no other, the men of the Bible "could not explain sin away as a vestigial defect or a mere 'not yet.'"[97]

Articles 20-23 were counteracted in the same manner. Despite the revelation of Jesus Christ, wrote Lowrie, there was still an unfathomable distance between God and man. Divine immanence was not to be taken for granted. Lowrie also protested Protestantism's dependence upon religious experience. Christian faith had been given over to the psychologists.

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[96] _Ibid_., pp. 29-30.

[97] _Ibid_., pp. 33-34.

"We have all become Methodists---without our knowing it we have all become disciples of Schleiermacher."[98]

In such a way, Lowrie adumbrated the major themes of the theology of crisis. He believed that each of these emphases, however, was really subsumed under one unifying principle enunciated by Kierkegaard---the infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity. It is not surprising that Lowrie, who was to make his name as a translator of "that tremendous Dane," traced the lineage of the Barthian movement back to the school of Kierkegaard.[99]

Lowrie was disturbed that the theology of crisis had made such a minor impact upon American theology. He was miffed, moreover, that so few of its original works had been translated into English. At the end of an introductory bibliography which revealed just one English translation of Kierkegaard, Lowrie charged that North America was "as backward as England." He claimed that he included the accusing bibliography for the very purpose of shaming those who were competent into making amends for the paucity of English works. "For what reason have we so many universities?" Lowrie asked sarcastically. "Is it to insure that studious youth shall be shielded from all contacts with contemporary thought?" He remarked later that North Americans were an "insular people" because Kierkegaard, known in Europe and South America, was a mysterious figure in the United States and Canada.[100]

Despite the fact that Barthianism had made few inroads into America since the First World War, Lowrie was cautiously hopeful that his countrymen were at least prepared to listen to the theology of crisis in 1932. The economic depression had finally checked "our ebullient optimism and our blind belief in the inevitability of progress." Since Americans were financially "broke," they might be able to comprehend what Barth meant by spiritual "brokenness." With its own crisis (one which seemed "trivial" to Europeans), America might now be receptive to the theology of crisis.[101]

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[98] Ibid., p. 36.

[99] Ibid., pp. 11, 13-14.

[100] Ibid., p. 22, and footnote 1, p. 27.

Substantive reviews of Our Concern were written by two interpreters of Barthianism, Elmer G. Homrighausen and Wilhelm Pauck. Homrighausen put his stamp of approval on the book. He noted that Lowrie had been able to see "from a distant perspective, by long residence in Europe, the real weakness of our theology and Christian expression." The reviewer realized, however, that Lowrie's book, tinged with "Germanisms" and "Continentalisms," would not be easy reading for Americans. The American mind could not readily digest the theology of crisis. But, Homrighausen encouraged his readers not to give up after an initial tussle with Barth's thought. "Think him THROUGH! I can see him chuckle at your tantrums!"[102]

Pauck's review was considerably less enthusiastic. Having resolved his "inner struggle" by a decision against Barth, Pauck was disturbed that Lowrie lacked a critical perspective. "Like many another Barth sympathizer, he has almost become Barth-possessed." Observing that his quotes from Barth were previous to the Dogmatics, Pauck suggested that Lowrie was blind to the later developments in Barth's thinking which, by virtue of its

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[101] Ibid., p. 52.

[102] Homrighausen, review of Our Concern, The Reformed Church Messenger, 106 (March 9, 1933), pp. 22-23.

"increasing dogmatization," was "less inviting if not actually forbidding." He implied that if Lowrie knew of the real drift of Barth's thought he would have been a much more reluctant advocate of the theology of crisis.[103]

Belatedly and Selectively

Elmer G. Homrighausen admitted in 1935 that Karl Barth and the theology of crisis had failed to make "a sweeping entry into the American theological scene." While a few theologians here and there had appropriated the Barthian viewpoint, these men were suspected of being "tired liberals or aliens to native American thought." Overall, Barthianism had simply not penetrated the American mind.[104]

Homrighausen cited several reasons for Barth's cool reception in this country. He asserted, for instance, that America possessed a "peculiar temper" which was simply not amenable to the contemplative bent of European theology. Compared with Europe, America was a young and activistic land, "abounding in the optimistic idea of man and the hope of progress." Furthermore, America could not comprehend Barth because it had been isolated from the shattering impact of the World War. Removed from the raw realities of that man-made catastrophe, our theologians could not truly appreciate what Barth had to say about "the deeper theological issues" involved in a post-war crisis that made Europeans "grasp for absolutes higher than and beyond themselves." Homrighausen also contended that Barth's "strange language" contributed to an intercontinental communication gap. Not only did Barth use the alien vocabulary of a zealous prophet, but he also employed an explosive style which obliterated the rules of sane and logical diction. "Like thunder claps and lightning flashes he dazed his readers more than he enlightened them."[105]

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[103] Pauck, "In the Barthian Mood," The Christian Century, 49 (Dec. 7, 1932), p. 1506.

[104] Homrighausen, "Barth and the American Theological Scene," The Union Seminary Review (Richmond), 46 (July, 1935), p. 284.

While Homrighausen detected some hopeful signs that Barth's voice might be increasingly welcomed in this country, he feared that the time had not yet come for Barth to make his initial visit to the United States. Even in the midst of a disastrous economic crisis, America appeared unresponsive to the radical prescriptions of the theology of crisis. Homrighausen concluded that America was not quite ready to receive the message of Karl Barth.[106]

It seems that America was never quite ready to receive the message of Barthianism. While Barth finally made a triumphant visit to this country in 1962, it was too late for his once radical message to make "a sweeping entry" into the American theological scene. By this time Barth's theology had mellowed considerably. This lion of transcendence had begun to lie down with the lambs of immanence.[107] Caught up in the euphoria of Barth's successful visit, Homrighausen proclaimed in 1963 that a dramatic change had taken place in America's attitude toward crisis theology, that Barth's message had finally crossed the Atlantic. A decade later, however, he would wistfully explain that Barth had never really "caught on" in America.[108]

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[105] Ibid., pp. 286-91.

[106] Ibid., pp. 292-93.

[107] See, for instance, Barth, The Humanity of God, Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960. Following his 1962 journey to America, Barth hinted why he had not visited before. "Who knows whether everything would have gone so peacefully, pleasantly, and amicably if I had appeared in the United States fifteen or perhaps even thirty years ago?" Karl Barth, "Foreword," Evangelical Theology, An Introduction, trans. Grover Foley (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1963), p. ix.

Writing in 1932 about the trends in contemporary theism, Henry P. Van Dusen predicted that the theology of crisis would never sink very deep roots in America. With its antiquated vocabulary and anti-rational thought-forms, Barthianism was quite unintelligible to American Christians. Moreover, it was simply "bad theology." While Van Dusen thought it improbable that the theology of crisis would exert a direct influence upon American theology, he did suggest that the next important development of theistic thought would "come to birth through it, or through something very nearly akin to it."[109]

Van Dusen's assessment was prophetic. For while Barthian theology was too radical to win many converts in this country, it did exert a significant influence upon the emergence of American neo-orthodoxy. The message of Karl Barth came to America indirectly, distilled in the form of this new religious movement. So, the strange voice from across the ocean had been heard after all. As Sydney Ahlstrom put it during the late fifties: "America did listen, though sometimes rather belatedly, and always rather selectively."[110]

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[108] Homrighausen, "Introduction" to Karl Barth, God in Action, pp. xi-xii; and Interview with Dennis N. Voskuil, June 8, 1972.

[109] Van Dusen, "Trends in Contemporary Theism," p. 188.

[110] Ahlstrom, "Continental Influence," p. 263.

CHAPTER IV

NEO-ORTHODOXY: THE BARTHIAN STRAIN

The emergence of American neo-orthodoxy was sporadic and spontaneous. In an uncoordinated fashion, a number of rebellious liberals, stimulated by social disaster and bolstered by Barthianism, began to promulgate an indigenous crisis theology during the early thirties. Unlike its European counterpart, neo-orthodoxy in this country mushroomed rather than exploded. The movement was not inaugurated by the shock waves of a particular "bombshell," hurled by a particular theologian. Rather, it was announced through the unsynchronized statements of a diverse group of thinkers.

The transition from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy was neither structured nor centralized. Sydney Ahlstrom has observed that the theological *bouleversement* was "emphatically a collective phenomenon which depended on no one man, coterie, or 'school.'"[1] While Reinhold Niebuhr was undoubtedly the popular giant of the new movement, it would be misleading to fix upon him for its normative statements. Niebuhr never claimed to be the spokesman for neo-orthodoxy, and he certainly was not interested in producing a new "school" of religious thought. In the Preface to *Reflections on the End of an Era*, for example, Reinhold indicated that even his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, disagreed with most of the book's conclusions.[2] So,

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[1] Ahlstrom, "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 313.

[2] Niebuhr, *Reflections*, p. x. Elmer G. Homrighausen has written that American neo-orthodoxy "was never intended to be a school." Letter to Dennis N. Voskuil, postmarked Nov. 14, 1972.

American neo-orthodoxy did not congeal around a central book, person or "school" of thought. Instead, the coagulant of the movement was a common theological perspective. Rejecting their liberal heritage, the formulators of neo-orthodoxy adopted motifs which, in many respects, were antithetical to liberalism. Emphasis was placed upon divine transcendence rather than immanence, human depravity rather than dignity, and cultural resistance rather than accommodation. These "antidotes" to liberalism, then, were the unifying principles of the new movement.

Two fairly distinctive types of neo-orthodoxy developed in this country during the early thirties---a "Barthian" strain and a "Niebuhrian" strain. Like most typologies, this one is somewhat arbitrary, but it is a helpful way of delineating the history of the movement.

The writings of Walter Lowrie, George W. Richards, Edwin Lewis and Elmer G. Homrighausen generally fall into the Barthian category. Each of these thinkers was quite receptive to the Kierkegaardian foundation of Continental neo-orthodoxy---the qualitative distinction between time and eternity. Not only did they serve as interpreters and translators of European crisis theology, they also formulated an indigenous form of neo-orthodoxy which was heavily flavored by the Barthian temper.

The writings of the Niebuhr brothers, Walter Marshall Horton and Wilhelm Pauck, on the other hand, reveal much less sympathy for Barthianism. These theologians generally appropriated Reinhold Niebuhr's criticism that Barth's doctrine of radical dualism had fostered social indifference and social defeatism. While he applauded Barth's rejection of liberalism, Niebuhr felt that the Swiss theologian had taken an ill-advised "flight into the absolute."[3] In deference to Niebuhr's persistent critique of Barth's social ethics, the second strain of American neo-orthodoxy has been designated "Niebuhrian."

While Pauck's _Karl Barth_ (1931) and Lowrie's _Our Concern_ (1932) were written in the neo-orthodox mood, these books were interpretations of European crisis theology and not bona fide theological treatises. Therefore, Reinhold Niebuhr's publication of 1932, _Moral Man and Immoral Society_, constituted the first significant contribution to indigenous neo-orthodoxy. Other important works were produced during the next four years. In 1934, the _annus mirabilis_[4] of the movement, a flood of important publications appeared---Horton's _Realistic Theology_, Niebuhr's _Reflections on the End of an Era_, Lewis' _Christian Manifesto_ and Richards' _Between Fundamentalism and Modernism_. The following year, the prolific Niebuhr published _An Interpretation of Christian Ethics_, and H. Richard Niebuhr and Pauck contributed essays to _The Church Against the World_. Homrighausen's _Christianity in America: A Crisis_ appeared in 1936. While they were reinforced by less significant writings, these eight books comprised the backbone of early American neo-orthodoxy.

Walter Lowrie: Barthian Prelude via Italy

Two years before the publication of _Our Concern With the Theology of Crisis_ (1932), certainly the most enthusiastic appraisal of the Continental movement produced in this country at the time, Walter Lowrie released a volume of Barth-inspired essays under the mysterious title, Religion or Faith. Written during 1925 in Rome, where Lowrie was serving as the rector of "St. Paul's-within-the-walls," this collection of essays (originally sermons) comprised a little-read prelude to the Barthian strain of American neo-orthodoxy. Lowrie, who also published a Barth-like commentary on the Gospel of Mark in 1929,[5] realized that Religion or Faith would find little acceptance in this country. In the Preface he noted sardonically that while one of the chapters had been pirated by an Italian newspaper, he was certain that there was no danger of a similar occurrence in America.[6] Lowrie boldly confessed his reliance upon the theology of crisis, calling it the "most virile and triumphant school of theology in modern Germany." The entire book, therefore, reverberated with Barthian and Kierkegaardian overtones. For instance, Lowrie proclaimed that the essential creed of Jesus, Paul and the whole church was best comprehended in "the solemn asseveration that God is God." And he scoffed at the notion that Christianity was one of the world's "religions." Christianity, according to the Episcopalian rector, was not a religion, but a revealed faith. "I belong to no religion (religious man that I am!), but am a believer in Jesus Christ."[7]

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[3] Niebuhr, "Barth---Apostle of the Absolute," p. 1524.

[4] So designated by Ahlstrom. See "Continental Influence," p. 265.

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[5] Lowrie, Jesus According to St. Mark (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929). This book was inspired by the success of Barth's Der Römerbrief, which Lowrie considered to be "a commentary rather in my style." (p. vii).

[6] Lowrie, Religion or Faith, p. vii.

[7] Ibid., pp. xv, 173, 30. "I will not say that I am a 'Barthian,'" wrote Lowrie, "but I am not loath to confess that the whole color and substance of this book is referable to the 'School of Crisis.'" (p. xv). In 1928, Lowrie submitted an article entitled "Religion or Faith" to the American Church Monthly, but the editor, not acquainted with Barth, thought it was absurd to distinguish between religion and faith, so he published it as "A Plea for Real Religion." See "Bibliography," Dr. Lowrie of Princeton and Rome, p. 238.

As its author predicted, Religion or Faith was virtually ignored by American theologians. It seems that only Lowrie's friends and an occasional seminary library obtained copies of the obscure work. Even Episcopalians must have been put off by the book. One copy contained this handwritten inscription to the Rt. Rev. Warden of the College of Preachers: "Fearfully submitted by the author who imagines a frown of disapproval lightened by a smile of contempt."[8] This prelude to American neo-orthodoxy, "fearfully submitted" by Walter Lowrie in 1930, hardly burst upon the theological scene.

George W. Richards: Between Fundamentalism and Modernism

The first neo-orthodox treatise of the Barthian strain to receive serious consideration was George W. Richards' Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism: The Gospel of God, published in 1934. A brilliant church historian who also served as President of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in the United States located at Lancaster, Pennsylvania,[9] Richards was a well-respected member of America's theological-ecclesiastical fraternity. His influence spread far beyond the rather narrow confines of the

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[8] Found on the inside cover of a copy located at the library of the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Inscribed at Princeton, June 20, 1930, the volume had been acquired from the library of Philip Mercer Rhinelander, former Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania (1911-1923), who was then serving as Warden of the College of Preachers, Washington, D.C.

[9] The seminary had been previously located at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, where the much-praised "Mercersburg Theology" of John W. Nevin and Philip Schaff was rooted. The Reformed Church in the United States merged with the Evangelical Synod of North America in 1934 to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The E. and R. merged in 1959 with the Congregational Christian Church and became part of the present day United Church of Christ. A dedicated ecumenist, Richards played a major role in the 1934 merger.

German-oriented Reformed Church, as he presided over a bewildering number of interdenominational and international Christian boards and agencies during his long and remarkable career. A Vice President of the Federal Council of Churches when Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism was published, Richards had previously served as a president of the American Society of Church History as well as the American Theological Society.[10] Unlike Walter Lowrie, who was virtually unknown before Our Concern and his translations of Kierkegaard, Richards had acquired an enviable reputation long before he became a spokesman for American neo-orthodoxy.

Although he was nurtured on the confessional orthodoxy of the Heidelberg Catechism, Richards cut his eyeteeth on theological liberalism. His encounter with Adolf von Harnack, while studying at Berlin in 1899, was extremely significant. He was so impressed, for a time, by Harnack's teachings about God's immanence and the historical Jesus that in 1904 he was classing himself with Harnack as a liberal.[11] Among American liberals, Richards was especially influenced by the writings of Lyman Abbott, the prominent New York churchman and editor. It was probably Abbott's social understanding of the Christian faith which most attracted him, as Richards seemed to be captivated by the Social Gospel during the first two decades of this century. For several years, he headed a commission on social service and wrote many articles related to the subject of social Christianity.[12] In 1923, Richards published Christian Ways of Salvation, a volume saturated with Social Gospel themes.

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[10] See "Brief Sketch of Career and Literature," a resume of Richards dated March, 1937. Located at the Library of the Historical Society of the Reformed Church in the United States, Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Charles E. Schaeffer, "Dr. Richards as a Reformed Churchman," Bulletin of the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 26 (October, 1955), pp. 1-10.

[11] See Richards, "What Is Christianity?" The Reformed Church Review, 8 (April, 1904), pp. 270-83. One biographer notes that even after his conversion to neo-orthodoxy Richards proudly acknowledged Harnack's influence upon his early career. See Earlin H. Lutz, "George Warren Richards: His Life and Learning, Work and Witness" (S.T.D. Thesis, Temple University, 1958), p. 88.

Richards' interests, however, soon veered in a different direction. During the mid-twenties, he traveled to Europe and became personally acquainted with Karl Barth, whose professorship at Göttingen had been subsidized by the Reformed Church in the United States.[13] Greatly impressed by Barth, Richards returned to this country and began to promulgate the theology of crisis. He wrote a number of articles which commended Barth's theology, assisted in the translating of sermons by Barth and Thurneysen, and invited Emil Brunner to deliver the Swander Lectures (later published as The Theology of Crisis) in 1928 at Lancaster.[14] In 1931, Richards returned to Europe, became reacquainted with Barth and Brunner, and renewed his understanding of the crisis theology.[15] Considering his long-standing attraction to the European movement, it was not at all surprising that Richards would publish a book which was cast in the Barthian mold.

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[12] See Schaeffer, "Dr. Richards," pp. 4, 7. Richards' Social Gospel articles included "The Necessity of Theological Reconstruction," The Reformed Church Review, 18 (Oct., 1914), pp. 535-61; "The Social Aspects of the Kingdom of God," The Reformed Church Messenger, 91 (Aug. 17, 1922), pp. 6-7; and "Is There Progress?" The Reformed Church Review, 4, Series V (Jan., 1925), pp. 1-22.

[13] Schaeffer, "Dr. Richards," p. 8.

[14] Two articles reached a relatively wide audience: "The Barthian Philosophy of History," The Crozer Quarterly, 9 (July, 1932), pp. 314-23; and "Palmer and Barth," The Christian Century, 51 (Jan. 10, 1934), pp. 54-55. Albert W. Palmer, President of Chicago Theological Seminary, had delivered an address, "The Eternal God and the Present Hour," at the opening session of the Federal Council of Churches (1933). For Richards as Barthian translator and host to Brunner, see Chapter III of this dissertation.

[15] See Richards, "With Theologians in Germany and Switzerland," Bulletin of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in the U.S., 2 (Oct., 1931), pp. 1-11.

The title, Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism, was significant, for it indicated that Richards walked a theological tightrope as he attempted to write a Barthian-tempered theology. In the Preface, the author candidly outlined his point of view. Richards confessed that he was deeply indebted to both fundamentalism and modernism. He admitted that the irenic brand of fundamentalism (he really meant confessional orthodoxy) found in the Heidelberg Catechism had "nourished the faith" of his "childhood and youth." It had mediated for him "the truth and grace of Jesus Christ." Likewise, modernism played a dominant role in Richards' theological maturity. It had delivered him "from the bondage of the letter" and had enabled him "to live in the freedom of the spirit." As one who reached his present position not only by way of the Heidelberg Catechism, but also by way of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack and Troeltsch, the author was confronted with a theological conundrum. He could not "return to fundamentalism," but at the same time he was "dissatisfied with liberalism." In order to avoid Scylla as well as Charybdis, Richards proposed a "Gospel of God" which would lead the faithful "above and beyond the limitations of both to the mountain heights whence come the good tidings to Zion."[16]

Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism was one of the least readable of the early American neo-orthodox publications. This was due, in part, to the pallid writing style of George Richards. He certainly did not write with the exuberant flair of Edwin Lewis or Elmer Homrighausen, nor with the flowing elegance of Walter Marshall Horton or H. Richard Niebuhr. But Richards' style was only a superficial drawback. More importantly, the book lacked cohesion and direction. In a distressing and distracting manner, Richards tacked back and forth, like a sea captain unsure of his bearings. Perhaps this was due to the subject matter. It was no mean task to grapple with the whole of the "Gospel of God" in a coherent and unified manner. It is more likely, however, that the title of the book itself betrayed the author's problem. In spite of Richards' contention that he was proposing a theology which went _beyond_ fundamentalism and modernism, his position seemed to rest _between_ fundamentalism and modernism. He was forced, therefore, to defend the "Gospel of God" from simultaneous attacks from the left and the right. The book lacked cohesion and coherence because Richards shifted his attention from one group of antagonists to the other. Caught between fundamentalism and modernism, Richards found it necessary to battle on two fronts at the same time.

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[16] Richards, Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism: The Gospel of God (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. ix-x.

Despite its structural difficulties, _Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism_ became an important contribution to early American neo-orthodoxy. And despite the fundamentalist sidetrack, the book possessed all the identifying characteristics of the movement. First, it reflected the mood of social and religious crisis. Second, it attacked American religious liberalism. And third, it proposed a counter-theology which stressed the "antidotes" to liberalism---God as transcendent, man as sinner, and church against the world.

The theme of cultural crisis was evident throughout the book. In a chapter which was devoted to "The Gospel in Times of Crisis," Richards proclaimed that modern man was "passing through an unparalleled crisis in human history." Under the sway of Oswald Spengler's analysis, Richards predicted doom for Western civilization. He cited the recent destruction of four European empires and the emergence of a dozen new nations, noted that the very social and religious foundations of Western society, which had long seemed "more immovable than rock-ribbed mountains," were "shaking and crumbling." Richards could only conclude that the race was "at the point of mental, moral, and spiritual bankruptcy."[17]

Richards operated with a very Barthian understanding of crisis. "Crisis," he wrote, "means judgment, separation of the true and the good from the false and the bad, of the godly from the ungodly, and of the human from the inhuman, of the merely human from the divine." Convinced that God had revealed the fullness of truth during the present time of crisis, Richards sanguinely announced that the Day of the Lord was at hand. "It is a day of darkness and of light, a day of despair and of hope; a day of loss irreparable and of gain immeasurable, a day of death and of life." The crisis of modern civilization, therefore, was viewed as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it meant the decay, destruction and death of the culture; on the other hand, it meant judgment, redemption and cleansing. The decline of the West signaled "the birth-throes of a new world."

Richards' liberal critique and his neo-orthodox restatement were interspersed and intertwined throughout _Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism_. Following Barth, Richards' theology revolved around the notion that there was a basic separation between man and God, between the finite and the infinite, between time and eternity. The deceptive fallacy of modern liberalism, then, was the fact that theology had become anthropology; God had been dragged down to the level of man. Liberal theologians were identified as the lineal descendants of Schleiermacher. In their attempts to appease the cultured despisers of religion, they had "humanized Christianity." In fact, the modern faith had become "de-Christianized---a mere shell out of which the good news has gone."[19]

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[17] _Ibid._, pp. 66-67.

[18] _Ibid._, pp. 66-67, 58.

Richards scorned liberal efforts to isolate God in matter and man, in science and history, in social progress and evolution. "The Gulf between God and man is so deep and so wide that no man can cross it; God alone can bridge the chasm." The Gospel of God, then, was founded upon the reality of divine transcendence.[20]

Richards' theology also took full cognizance of the awful reality of human sinfulness. Reflecting his Reformed background, Richards perceived sin in the fact that "man will get on without God, that he will put himself in God's stead, that he deliberately rejects the divine purpose manifested in Christ and puts his own aspirations in place of it." Despite the stark evidence of sin in the modern world, the liberal mind refused to recognize its horrible reality. There may be "imperfection, ignorance, error, crime, vice, folly," but certainly, liberals assured, not sin against the will of God. Sin, according to modern man, no longer existed. Indeed, wrote Richards, "We are told that the word sin should be deleted from our language." Such was the self-delusion of modern man. Such was the temper of modern religious liberalism. Such was the crisis of modern civilization.[21]

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[19] Ibid., p. 25.

[20] Ibid., pp. 25, 247.

[21] Ibid., pp. 45, 259-60.

Richards also scored cultural accommodation and cultural compromise. While admitting that modernism had been a necessary lubricant for Christian dogmas and institutions, Richards warned that it had gotten out of hand. The seemingly noble effort to "humanize Christianity and Christianize humanity" had resulted in "an enlightened self-reliant humanism, with a thin veneer or a faint tinge of Christian theism, parading as liberal and refined Christianity." While the fundamentalists had wrapped the gospel "in the graveclothes of theology," the liberals had trimmed it down "to fit the demands of science and utilitarian ethics."[22]

Richards concluded that the modern church had been too eager to keep abreast of the times. Dangerous modifications of the gospel were made when liberal churchmen adjusted it "to the political, economic or scientific needs of the age." In one unusually specific example, Richards reminded his readers that the Great War had compromised the American church. Ministers and laymen too readily jumped aboard the military bandwagon even though, in reality, the church and the military had diametrically opposite goals. The Army and the Church could not march under the same banner. "One bears the sword; the other the cross. The one is of this world; the other of the world to come. They must either separate, or one must be submerged in the other."[23] Repulsed by the war and influenced by the radical strains of Barthian theology, Richards proclaimed that the church must stand against the world!

Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism exhibited all the basic traits of a Barthian-oriented early American neo-orthodox treatise. Yet, while

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[22] _Ibid._, pp. 206-207.

[23] _Ibid._, p. 212.

Richards was obviously influenced by the European crisis theologian, he was not a full-fledged Barthian. Like the other initiators of neo-orthodoxy, Richards did not completely shake his liberal heritage. A glimmer of optimism and idealism always shone through. Moreover, one who had been so deeply immersed in the Social Gospel movement could not rest comfortably with Barth's extremely eschatological viewpoint. Richards remained confident that the gospel could permeate and regenerate the world. While he used Barthian arguments and, to some extent, Barthian terminology, Richards did not accept the radical conclusions of the theology of crisis.

The reviewers duly noted the Barthian features of the book. Frederick Grant, for instance, indicated that Richards' indebtedness to Barth was "clear on almost every page."[24] Yet, the most incisive critics realized that the author was not a pure exponent of European crisis theology. Edwin Ewart Aubrey observed that Richards was not simply parroting Barth or Brunner, because he stated their position "in terms closer to American ways of thinking." Indeed, Aubrey commended Richards for going beyond Barthianism, for not divorcing himself "so completely from the theology of experience," and for acknowledging "God's activity in the human soul."[25] Theodore F. Herman, a colleague at Lancaster, doubted that President Richards deserved to be labeled a Barthian. Despite its obvious debts to the crisis theologian, Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism was certainly not built on the

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[24] Frederick C. Grant, review of Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism, The Anglican Theological Review, 16 (Oct., 1934), p. 309.

[25] Edwin Ewart Aubrey, "Beyond Modernism?" The Journal of Religion, 15 (Jan., 1935), p. 81.

"fragile foundation of Barth's dualistic irrationalism." Barth aside, Herman was convinced that, born out of the insight of the "tragic experiences" of the latter days, Richards' theology was the necessary religious tonic for disillusioned America.[26]

Most American religious liberals were less impressed by the Barthian-tempered book than was Richards' associate at Lancaster. Aubrey, writing from the University of Chicago, poignantly expressed America's skeptical reaction even to warmed-over Barthian thought. The book was called "a stimulating critique of the loose features in recent modernist thinking," but in the end, Richards had failed to offer a satisfactory alternative for meeting the problems which modernism had confronted. Aubrey concluded with a harsh judgment about Richards' book. He asked rhetorically, "Does it really go *beyond* modernism?"[27]

Edwin Lewis: A Neo-Orthodox Manifesto

"TO ALL WHO ARE CONCERNED THAT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH SHALL NOT PERISH FROM THE EARTH."[28] In such a bold-faced manner, Edwin Lewis dedicated *A Christian Manifesto*, his clarion call to American neo-orthodoxy. First printed in August, 1934, this book reached religious bookstores almost simultaneously with Richards' *Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism*. However, in spite of the similar publication date and the fact that both authors were influenced by Barthian theology, these two American neo-orthodox treatises varied dramatically in style, temper and occasion.

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[26] Theodore F. Herman, review of *Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism*, *Bulletin of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in the United States*, *6* (Jan., 1935), pp. 39-48.

[27] Aubrey, "Beyond Modernism?" p. 81.

[28] Lewis, *Christian Manifesto*, Dedication Page.

Lewis was a devoted lifelong Methodist who served as a missionary and a pastor before he joined the faculty of Drew Theological Seminary in 1916.[29] Because of a number of provocative liberal-oriented articles, he soon gained a reputation as a standard-bearer for liberal theology.[30] Inevitably, Lewis became a focal point in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy which rumbled beneath the surface of American Methodism during the early twenties. Indeed, when his first book, Jesus Christ and the Human Quest was about to be published in 1924, high Methodist officials urged Lewis to hold back the manuscript because its liberal perspectives were deemed too inflammatory. When the book was released, it quickly became a "storm center," and only because of the loyalty of President Ezra S. Tipple (who himself did not approve of the book) was Lewis able to retain his position at Drew.[31]

Liberalism, however, was merely one stage in Lewis' intellectual pilgrimage. During the decade which separated Jesus Christ and the Human Quest and A Christian Manifesto, Lewis experienced a profound theological conversion. The prince of the liberals during the twenties became a proponent of American neo-orthodoxy during the thirties.

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[29] For background information about Lewis, see Lynn Harold Hough, "The Rev. Edwin Lewis," in James Richard Joy, ed., The Teachers of Drew, 1867-1942 (Madison, N.J.: Drew University Press, 1942), pp. 143-46.

[30] Three articles were especially odious to conservatives: "The Social Theology," The Methodist Review, 102 (March, 1919), pp. 226-38; "The Problem of the Person of Christ," The Methodist Review, 106 (Jan., 1923), pp. 116-27; and "Human Nature and the Christian Redemption," The Methodist Review, 107 (Jan., 1924), pp. 35-47.

[31] Carl Michalson, "The Edwin Lewis Myth," The Christian Century, 77 (Feb. 24, 1960), p. 218; and Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," The Christian Century, 56 (June 14, 1939), p. 762.

Lewis has testified that he began to move away from liberalism when he undertook the editorship of The Abingdon Commentary in 1926. Three years of sustained Biblical study stirred a revolution in his thinking. With a "devastating clarity," Lewis began to perceive that speculative philosophy was untenable for a Christian faith rooted in the Word of God.[32] Despite his discovery of the Bible, he did not break ranks with liberalism, at least publicly, until early 1933, when he offered a critical review of the Laymen's Commission report, Re-Thinking Missions, which had been published during the previous year. Lewis believed that the report, drafted mainly by William Ernest Hocking, had glossed over the Biblical and historical essence of Christianity.[33] A few months later, in an article for Religion in Life called "The Fatal Apostasy of the Modern Church," he unleashed a vigorous attack against liberalism. Convinced that the liberals had sacrificed the living core of the Christian faith on the altar of modernity, Lewis proclaimed that the contemporary church had been left a creed of social action, but not a creed of faith. Urging the church away from cultural accommodation, he sounded a bugle call for the affirmation of essential Christianity. "Let us be done with compromise, and let us affirm---affirm magnificently, affirm audaciously."[34]

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[32] Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," p. 763.

[33] Lewis, "The Re-Thought Theology of Re-Thinking Missions," The Drew Gateway, 4 (April, 1933), pp. 3-6.

[34] Lewis, "The Fatal Apostasy," p. 491.

"The Fatal Apostasy" set the scene for A Christian Manifesto, in which Lewis did affirm the faith audaciously if not magnificently. In the Foreword, he revealed that the bombastic article had stimulated a barrage of letters. While a number of the correspondents were "definitely hostile,"[35] most were grateful for his bold statement. Many who read the article encouraged Lewis to elaborate upon its ideas in the form of a book. At first he resisted, partly because of the "ferment" in his own mind and partly because he realized "how sharply the implications of the article cut across much of the accepted thinking of the time." Soon, however, his ideas coalesced and, no longer shrinking from "inevitable criticism," Lewis wrote the book.[36]

Unlike Richards, who engaged theological opponents on two fronts, Lewis directed the full force of his manifesto at one movement---religious liberalism. Even though he had been a prime target of the conservatives during the twenties, Lewis refused to be diverted in that direction. His polemic was directed solely against the perversions of liberal theology.

Lewis' indictment of modernism, so dramatically outlined in "The Fatal Apostasy," was fleshed out in the first chapter of A Christian Manifesto. Entitled "The Needless Retreat," the chapter argued that modern theologians had surrendered the distinctive and essential features of the faith. By rejecting and reinterpreting the traditional doctrines---divine transcendence, special revelation, incarnation, atonement, redemption---the liberals had engendered an "apostate church." Moreover, the Christian faith had been left in an enfeebled position, easy prey for the arguments of historical relativists. "Denuded of its distinctive features," wrote Lewis, Christianity was merely deemed a religion among religions. It no longer consummated and antiquated all other religions.[37]

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[35] Lewis, Christian Manifesto, p. 9. "I was told that I had evidently 'gone Barthian,' that I had 'sold out to the Fundamentalists,' that I had 'abandoned my own cause,' that clearly I had 'passed my creative period and was becoming senile and conservative,' . . .and I was asked if I desired to be regarded as a man who had 'slipped back into orthodoxy!" (Ibid.)

[36] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Even the strong suit of the liberal faith---its social dimension---was rather skeptically dismissed by Lewis. He viewed the Social Gospel sympathetically, but asserted that the Christian ethic divorced from the Christian faith was a supreme example of "the fatal antithesis of a splendid idealism and the necessary power of attainment." Nothing was more pathetic, Lewis intoned, "than a noble eagle whose wings have been clipped: great aspirations but earthbound feet!"[38]

Although Lewis condemned the modern church for capitulating to modern thought, he did not believe that Christianity and modernity were necessarily incompatible. Hence, the liberal retreat was, for the most part, "needless." Lewis, who was sympathetic toward scientific methods of investigation, criticism and evaluation, believed that liberals had mistaken "the necessity of making peripheral adjustments for the necessity of exscinding the vital core." The faith of the liberals had simply not been bold enough. Lewis was convinced that a vital Christian faith could have met modernity head on, and indeed, even served as a "floodlight. . .thrown on the accumulated riddles of the modern mind." Instead, the Christian faith had been "reduced to a flickering candle, around which we place a nervous hand lest even that much light should be extinguished by the cold winds of doubt." Enough of this sort of tentative, compromising, timid Christianity! Enough of this needless retreat! Enough of this fatal apostasy! "We have a faith," insisted Lewis. "Let us be done with forever halfheartedly apologizing for it, and instead let us aggressively, confidently, and self-forgetfully proclaim it."[39]

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[37] Ibid., pp. 11, 19.

[38] Ibid., p. 19.

The theological corrective proposed by Lewis was built upon a solid theistic cornerstone. He suggested that the liberals had cheated themselves out of a vibrant and potent idea of God because of a "deadly fear of supernaturalism," which they supposed had been outmoded by modern thought. Lewis compared the modernist conception of the supernatural being to Hegel's "God in process" who "was nothing but a huge system of logic." Bound to the inexorable processes of the universe, Hegel's God had "no more control over himself than running water or flying sparks." The Methodist professor even asserted that he preferred to live in a Calvinistic universe, in which every detail "was under the absolute control of the inscrutable will of a sovereign God" rather than in the kind of universe described by scientific determinism.[40]

Lewis urged that the modern church "get some iron into its thinking about God." Divine Fatherhood did not mean Divine Paternalism. God was not the president of the local Rotary Club. All the great characters of religious history believed in "a Great God, a God who had the right to smash them if that is what he saw fit to do." Modern Christians, however, no longer felt the mysterium tremendum; they had forgotten how to shudder at the thought of God. Lewis laid the blame on the liberal theologians:

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[39] Ibid., pp. 27-28.

[40] Ibid., pp. 101-104.

> What can we expect of the modern church when from one side we are being told that all that "God" means is Law, Evolution, Process, Value, Structure, Idea, or what not; and from the other side that he is a being so kind and gentle that no matter what we are or what we do we need not "fear" him?[41]

This sharp denunciation of the liberal conception of God was accompanied by an equally sharp denunciation of the liberal conception of man. Lewis argued that modern theology had discarded an integral element of the Christian faith---the doctrine of sin. The traditional understanding of sin, whereby human nature was inherently weak and defective, had been abandoned in the face of a relentless attack by modern science. Environmental determinists had driven the Christian understanding of sin out of the modern consciousness. Psychologists and biologists nearly took for granted that "modern man cannot commit sin."[42]

Despite the objections of the modernists, Lewis adamantly insisted on the "empiric reality of sin." While he was leery of dragging back into theology "hoary old superstitions" like "original sin" and "natural depravity," Lewis was convinced that these phrases represented vivid insights into the nature of man. Sin was not merely the sum-total of so many separate and specific deeds, but it was already implied as a fact in the deeds themselves. "Man sins because he is a sinner." Such a conception of human nature, thought Lewis, would throw cold water on the naive hopes of those who would eradicate social evils by manipulating the environment. Environmental adjustments would not bring about a Kingdom of God on earth. Only God, concluded Lewis, could secure man's ultimate redemption.[43]

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[41] Ibid., pp. 151-53.

[42] Ibid., pp. 131-32.

A Christian Manifesto dealt almost exclusively with doctrinal issues. It was the work of a die-hard systematic theologian. Still, it was permeated with the mood of cultural despair and disillusionment. Normally, this mood of crisis was well camouflaged, but in a chapter concerning "The Great Tribulation," Lewis asked his readers to take stock of the dismal state of the contemporary world. He visualized an almost-Manichaean struggle taking place between the Spirit of Light and the Spirit of Darkness. It seemed that a wild beast was "crouched at the door" ready to spring its terrors upon the world. The world was in a frightfully perilous condition. Lewis concluded that nobody but "a facile optimist" could face the spectacle of the twentieth-century world and not feel that a "malign spirit" was at work.[44]

The crisis of culture was intimately related to the crisis of faith which played so heavily on the author's mind. Essentially, the book was an urgent response to the crisis of belief in the modern church. The mood of urgency and crisis dictated the very style of the treatise. Determined to save the church from the fatal apostasy of modernism, Lewis wrote with proclamatory zeal and fervor. The one-time missionary thumped away at his readers, often using second person pronouns, in a relentless effort to secure conversions to his theological system. There were few literary flourishes, few poetic paragraphs or well-turned phrases. Committed to a high and solemn cause, Lewis refused to be distracted by nonessentials. The style as well as the substance served to mold the book as a powerful proclamation of American neo-orthodoxy.

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[43] Ibid., pp. 137-140.

[44] Ibid., p. 207.

Lewis did not overtly refer to the Barthian movement in A Christian Manifesto. That does not mean, however, that the theology of crisis did not play an important role in the reconstruction of Lewis' theology. At the same time in which Lewis was discovering the Bible as an editor of The Abingdon Commentary, he was discovering Karl Barth. In fact, Lewis later admitted that reading Barth gave him the courage to keep his mind exposed to Biblical revelation.[45] In 1932, Lewis even delivered a brilliant lecture on Barth's thought which was later published in the Christian Century.[46] He was quite obviously attracted to European neo-orthodoxy.

A Christian Manifesto, however, was not a strictly Barthian book. Lewis was uncomfortable with the radical features of Continental neo-orthodoxy. For example, while he insisted upon a potent deity, Lewis rejected the Barthian extreme. He was repulsed by the notion of God as "The Passionless Absolute, the Unmoved Mover, the Wholly Transcendental, or the prototype of the haughty Oriental despot, the symbol of whose power is a sword."[47] According to Lewis, God was approachable and accessible. Unwilling to assimilate the absolutes of Barthian thought, Lewis wrote a neo-orthodox manifesto which, although informed by European crisis theology, was peculiarly American.

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[45] Lewis, "How Barth Has Influenced Me," Theology Today, 13 (Oct., 1956), p. 358.

[46] See Lewis, "Main Emphases in the Theology of Karl Barth," A Lecture Delivered in the Chapel at Drew University, October 27, 1932 (Madison, N.J.: Drew University Press, 1932). This lecture was later republished in two segments, "What is Barth Trying to Say?" The Christian Century, 50 (Jan. 18, 1933), pp. 82-84; and "The Theology of Karl Barth," The Christian Century, 50 (Jan. 25, 1933), pp. 120-21. These lectures appeared so favorable that Lewis was forced to submit a more critical sequel, "Where Is Barth Wrong?" The Christian Century, 50 (March 22, 1933), pp. 385-87.

Lewis' provocative broadside was welcomed by many church leaders who had long deplored the modernist trend in American theology. A Methodist pastor from Woodbury, New Jersey, for example, wrote Lewis how much he appreciated his "defense of the Gospel."[48] A pastor from Alpena, Michigan, wrote that A Christian Manifesto had "sounded THE note that must be sounded in trumpet tones."[49] William F. Seitter from Dawson, Pennsylvania, proclaimed enthusiastically that the book was the "most significant production in the past fifty years." Like many other anti-modernist Methodists, Seitter admitted that he was bolstered by the reassuring arguments expressed in A Christian Manifesto. "Thank God for Lewis!"[50]

Despite these flowing encomia from conservative Methodists, the book was not uncritically received by American theologians. As Lewis predicted, religious liberals were dumbfounded and disturbed by his new theological stance. Many critics were convinced that Lewis, so long a bellwether of Methodist liberalism, had betrayed a noble cause and returned to orthodoxy. Norman Twiddy informed Lewis that his revolt against humanistic tendencies and against naturalism had swung him too far back to the "abandoned dugouts" of traditionalism.[51] John Versteeg, a prominent Ohio pastor, was concerned that Lewis was "forsaking the fight for spiritual liberty." Referring to Browning's poem about Wordsworth, he labeled Lewis the "Lost Leader" of Methodist liberalism. Although Versteeg felt that Lewis' theological about-face was entirely genuine, he was alarmed by the fact that one of Methodism's best minds appeared to be speaking in terms of "a Barthian automaton."[52]

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[47] Lewis, Christian Manifesto, p. 152.

[48] B. Harrison Decker, letter to Edwin Lewis, Oct. 17, 1934. The Lewis Papers have been deposited at the Drew University Library, Madison, New Jersey.

[49] George Brown Thomas, letter to Edwin Lewis, August 29, 1934.

[50] William F. Seitter, letter to Edwin Lewis, Sept. 6, 1934.

The liberal reviewers were no less disturbed by Lewis' theological conversion. In a review article for the Christian Century entitled "A Recall to Orthodoxy," Harris Franklin Rall predicted that some of the author's friends and critics would interpret his new volume as "an about-face, an acceptance of Barthianism or a surrender to traditionalism." Rall, a prominent Methodist theologian, did not want to go that far, but he did think that "a marked change" had taken place in the thought of the Drew scholar. While applauding the "moral earnestness and spiritual integrity" of the book, Rall was disappointed in its conclusions. In particular, he scorned a Barth-like effort "to conserve the reality of the divine, or supernatural, by thrusting aside or minimizing the ethical, social, historical categories." Rall believed that it was necessary to face the present-day religious crisis in America, but he insisted that the only way out of the crisis was by going forward, "and not by retracing our theological steps."[53]

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[51] Norman Twiddy, letter to Edwin Lewis, Sept. 3, 1934.

[52] John Versteeg, letters to Edwin Lewis, Nov. 27, 1934 and Nov. 20, 1934.

[53] Harris Franklin Rall, "A Recall to Orthodoxy," The Christian Century, 51 (Nov. 7, 1934), pp. 1415-16.

The most devastating review was written by the liberal Methodist bishop, Francis J. McConnell, for Religion in Life. McConnell was particularly agitated by Lewis' anachronistic supernaturalism. Twentieth-century Christians, he suggested, would hardly share the author's preference to be "damned for the glory" of an "old-fashioned Calvinistic notion of God." Lewis had obviously capitulated to some sort of theological dogmatism, a new form of orthodoxy. Reminded that the author had called for more "iron" in contemporary theology, McConnell wrote that he agreed, "if we are to use the iron as a tonic. We do not, however, need any more cast-iron, after the fashion of a rigid frame in which divine qualities are to be set."[54]

W. W. Gethman did not share the fear of American liberals that Lewis had been converted to Barthian orthodoxy. In a particularly penetrating review for the Student World, Gethman assured the liberals that Lewis' manifesto contained little of Barth's terminology or radical thought. With its stress upon supernaturalism and upon sin, Lewis' theology was related to Barthianism, but it was, nevertheless, a new American theology "in harmony with what may be termed the American temper." Gethman praised Lewis, and challenged other theologians to assist in the formulation of "An American Theology of Crisis."[55]

A Christian Manifesto gained considerable notoriety among Methodist theologians. A bishop once informed Carl Michalson: "With that book

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[54] Francis J. McConnell, review of A Christian Manifesto, Religion in Life, 3 (Autumn, 1934), pp. 614-18.

[55] W. W. Gethman, "An American Theology of Crisis," The Student World, 28 (First Quarter, 1935), pp. 84-86. Gethman was General Secretary of the World's Committee of Y.M.C.A.'s. The Student World was an international quarterly published in Geneva by the World's Student Christian Federation.

Edwin Lewis saved American Methodism."[56] This broadside proclamation, however, had an impact far beyond the confines of one denomination. Even C. F. H. Henry, the brilliant neo-fundamentalist, labeled Lewis' publication the "trumpet call to neo-orthodoxy."[57] While Henry may have been too generous with this apparently backhanded compliment, A Christian Manifesto was certainly one of the trumpet calls of American neo-orthodoxy.

Elmer G. Homrighausen: An American Theology of Crisis

Among the initiators of American neo-orthodoxy, Elmer G. Homrighausen was most clearly influenced by the Barthian movement. In 1936, Homrighausen wrote Christianity in America: A Crisis, an unabashed effort to formulate an American theology of crisis. While other proponents of neo-orthodoxy held themselves at least an arm's length from Barthianism, Homrighausen embraced the movement and attempted to mold it to the peculiar shape of American religion. Homrighausen's theology was the purest example of Barthian-tempered American neo-orthodoxy.

While Homrighausen had been reared in a conservative religious environment, he had been attracted to liberalism during the mid-twenties. The spirit of liberalism began to dawn on him as he engaged in part-time graduate study at Chicago and Dubuque while serving Reformed churches in Freeport, Illinois and Indianapolis. It is debatable whether the young pastor ever adopted liberal theology, but it cannot be doubted that, at one time, he was very much influenced by the liberal movement.[58]

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[56] Michalson, "The Edwin Lewis Myth," p. 218.

[57] Henry, Fifty Years of Protestant Theology, p. 63.

[58] See Homrighausen, "Calm After Storm," The Christian Century, 56 (April 12, 1939), p. 477; and letter to Dennis N. Voskuil, postmarked Nov. 14, 1972.

During the late twenties, Homrighausen encountered the writings of Karl Barth and soon experienced "a radical conversion" in his entire religious perspective.[59] His drift into liberalism abruptly halted, Homrighausen soon became one of the principal American interpreters and translators of Barthian thought.[60] Trips to the Continent and personal meetings with the crisis theologians helped to solidify his lifelong interest in European neo-orthodoxy.

Not surprisingly, Christianity in America focused upon the crisis of belief in the modern American church. A dedicated pastor whose period of ministry coincided almost exactly with the decade of America's "religious depression,"[61] Homrighausen was particularly attuned to the theological concerns of the local parish. In the Introduction, he underlined the grassroots perspective of the treatise:

> It is a personal chronicle of faith by a pastor working in "the field of the world," watching the modern temper as it affects the life of the pastor and the average congregation, and is written with the local congregation in mind.[62]

Foreshadowing the strong flavor of anti-intellectualism which pervaded the entire book,[63] Homrighausen proclaimed that he was focusing upon the church because a resurgence of theological vitality would have to be initiated at the grassroots level and not in academic ivory towers. "We need not look for revivals to start among the intellectuals."[64]

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[59] Homrighausen, "Calm After Storm," p. 478.

[60] See Chapter III of this dissertation.

[61] See Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935," Church History, 29 (March, 1960), pp. 3-16.

[62] Homrighausen, Christianity in America: A Crisis (New York: Abingdon Press, 1936), p. 9.

[63] The second chapter was entitled "Sterile Intellectualism," a reversion to the theme which he had delineated earlier in "A Young Minister's Counter-Revolt." See Chapter II of this dissertation.

Homrighausen defined America's religious crisis as "a lack of theological authority in matters of the faith." Challenged by modern secular thought, American Protestantism was in a state of despair and disarray. Fundamentalism was unable to provide a staunch defense of the faith because of its static literalism and dry scholasticism. It was an antiquated science, "the ghost of the past trying to live in another day."[65] But the liberal alternative could not meet the challenge either. In fact, the fatal weakness of the liberal theology was precisely its condescension to the thought and forms of secular culture. In its effort to be modern, liberalism practically liquidated "the whole Christian tradition by explaining everything away." In its desiccated condition, the liberal faith lacked any kind of theological authority and vitality. Homrighausen ridiculed it as shallow, flabby, anaemic and formless, "a loose program of social betterment, a technique of spiritual development, a human 'value' of the highest kind."[66]

Homrighausen suggested that the critical condition of religion had been exacerbated by the breakdown of American culture.

> Unemployment, the rise of the class struggle, the depression, the checking of our energetic prosperity, the defeat of Prohibition, the disillusionment follow-

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[64] Homrighausen, Christianity in America, p. 9. Homrighausen, of course, was wrong on this point. American neo-orthodoxy was, above all, an intellectual and academic movement.

[65] Ibid., pp. 22, 13.

[66] Ibid., pp. 13, 19.

> ing the Great War as regards a warless world and a world of democracy, our criminal record, or political "gangsterism," and many other hard facts have shocked us into seeing life in other than optimistic terms.

Confronted with tragedy and despair, liberalism, with its rosy view of life, no longer seemed tenable. The Day of Judgment had come for modern Protestantism, and much which had passed for church work, worship, teaching and preaching was being consumed by the awful flames.[67] The crisis of culture signaled a crisis for the church.

Homrighausen's theological remedy for the crisis of American Christianity was rooted in the categories of Barthian thought. In the first place, he proclaimed that the church must allow God to be God. American Christianity had become too anthropocentric. It assumed that man could apprehend God---"climb to heaven and bring God down." The modern church, therefore, needed a vigorous conception of the sovereign and transcendent God, "a God who is beyond man's quest, but who meets man's quest in revelation."[68] Only a powerful and potent God could rescue man from the crisis of existence.

In attempting to bridge the chasm between God and man, liberalism had been forced to abandon a realistic doctrine of sin. Liberalism had "toned down the nature of sin from innate guilt which separates him from God. . . to an idea of sin as a mere ignorance of the right or an impediment in human nature which will be eliminated through educational processes."[69] Not only was God pulled down, but in the process man was elevated. Homrighausen protested the liberal effort to obfuscate the awful reality of human sin. Man was a sinner! No evolutionary development or educational process could efface the indelible stain of sin.

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[67] Ibid., pp. 34-35.

[68] Ibid., pp. 70, 80.

[69] Ibid., p. 174.

Christianity in America did not elicit a very hearty response. Homrighausen had stated in the Introduction that he had no illusions as to the success of his Barthian-oriented treatise. It was described as a "cry in the wilderness" by one who stood outside the mainstream of religious thought in America.[70] Although the bombastic and roughhewn style of the book did little to promote heavy sales, Homrighausen was probably correct. The Barthian tone most likely proved to be a liability.

In a rather sympathetic review for the Christian Century, H. Richard Niebuhr correctly predicted that Homrighausen's book would be dismissed by the liberals as "another effort to apply Barthian theology to American conditions, or to re-establish a critical or uncritical supernaturalism."[71] The liberals did dismiss (and overlook) the treatise because of its stereotyped Barthian critique of American religion. Edwin Ewart Aubrey, for example, protested that Homrighausen had too readily accepted Barth's sweeping indictment of liberal theology. Barthianism was a necessary call back to perspective, but it eroded "two hundred years of serious reflection on the nature of knowledge." Crisis theology was not a confrontation, but a retreat from the problems of contemporary faith. Aubrey insisted, moreover, that the time had come for "a mediating scholarship" which appreciated the Barthian challenge, but was ready "to examine the skeptical positions as well."[72]

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[70] Ibid., p. 12. Homrighausen believes that his first book, which echoed "the Barthian note," appeared "too early to make an impact." Letter to Dennis N. Voskuil, April 3, 1972.

[71] H. Richard Niebuhr, "A Call for Religious Authority," The Christian Century, 54 (Jan. 6, 1937), p. 19.

Aubrey's reaction to Homrighausen's treatise was symptomatic. Despite its evangelical fervor, Barthian-tempered neo-orthodoxy attracted few converts in this country. The indigenous crisis theologies espoused by Lowrie, Richards, Lewis and Homrighausen were too closely related to European neo-orthodoxy to take root in the religious soil of America.

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[72] Edwin Ewart Aubrey, review of Christianity in America, The Journal of Religion, 17 (July, 1937), pp. 333-34.

CHAPTER V

NEO-ORTHODOXY: THE NIEBUHRIAN STRAIN

Barthian-tempered neo-orthodoxy played a relatively minor role in the religious revolution which occurred in this country during the early thirties. The flavor of its message was simply too "Continental" for the theological tastes of America. Another brand of neo-orthodoxy, however, was considered much more palatable. Less tainted by Barthianism, and more in concert with the social and ethical dimensions of American religion, Niebuhrian-tempered neo-orthodoxy moved with greater ease into the theological vacuum created by the disintegration of religious liberalism.

Reinhold Niebuhr: Toward a Realistic Theology

During the early thirties, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a trio of books which signaled his emergence as a charter member of the American neo-orthodox movement. Interpreted chronologically, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) document the gradual unfolding of his realistic theology. This was quite obviously a critical period in Niebuhr's intellectual development.

Like the other early exponents of the movement, Niebuhr was channeled into neo-orthodoxy through religious liberalism. While studying at Yale before the war, he had absorbed the liberal perspectives of his mentor, Douglas Clyde Macintosh. Niebuhr's 1915 Master's thesis on "The Contribution of Christianity to the Doctrine of Immortality" revealed that he was a rather typical product of early twentieth-century liberal thought. A recent biographer maintains that this thesis "makes clear beyond any reasonable doubt that, as a young man, he shared the liberal temper of his time and rejected traditional Christian claims on the basis of their incredibility to the sophisticated mind of his day."[1] Niebuhr himself has confessed that he "celebrated an optimistic faith" before the outbreak of the European War.[2]

The Great War certainly had a sobering impact upon the faith of the Yale liberal.[3] Niebuhr has indicated, however, that it was not so much the distant war which undermined his "youthful optimism" as the social and spiritual realities he encountered while serving a church in Detroit between 1915 and 1928. As the pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church, Niebuhr discovered that the idealistic and optimistic faith which he had inhaled at Yale was "as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as it was to the complex social issues of an industrial city."[4]

Niebuhr's disaffection for religious liberalism began to seep into a number of his articles during the early twenties. Later in that decade he evolved a devastating critique of the reigning assumptions of liberal theology---divine immanence, human perfectability and cultural accommodation. By 1928, when he left Detroit to become an Instructor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Niebuhr had emerged as the pre-eminent critic of liberalism in America.[5]

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[1] Ronald H. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), pp. 22-23.

[2] Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 5.

[3] See Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," pp. 1161-63.

[4] Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," pp. 5-6. A captivating diary of Niebuhr's experiences as a Detroit pastor were published in 1929. See Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, New York: The World Publishing Co., 1929.

Despite his early dissatisfaction with liberal theology, Niebuhr did not construct a neo-orthodox alternative until the early thirties. His realistic theology began to take shape when he issued the trio of early neo-orthodox publications. By 1935, he had developed potent antidotes for the motifs of liberalism. God was perceived as sovereign and transcendent. Man was viewed as limited and culpable. And the church was warned against cultural capitulation.

Moral Man and Immoral Society has been portrayed by Sydney Ahlstrom as the Römerbrief of the American neo-orthodox movement. Borrowing Karl Adam's famous metaphor, Ahlstrom has hailed the book as "the chief religio-ethical bombshell of domestic construction that has fallen in twentieth-century America."[6] While the obvious overkill inherent in such a pronouncement must be taken into account, it cannot be disputed that Niebuhr's dynamic treatise delivered some damaging blows to religious and secular liberalism. As H. Shelton Smith has observed, Moral Man was certainly "the most devastating American polemic of its time."[7]

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[5] See Chapter II of this dissertation for Niebuhr's early critique of religious liberalism.

[6] Sydney Ahlstrom, "Continental Influence," p. 264. Ahlstrom has recently reiterated this claim. See Religious History, p. 941.

[7] H. Shelton Smith, "The Post-Liberal Theological Mind," in American Christianity, Volume II, p. 427.

It must be remembered, however, that while Moral Man rattled the ethical and political shibboleths of liberalism, its focus was primarily non-theological. Ahlstrom has admitted, for instance, that the basic arguments of the treatise were "essentially secular," acceptable to the "Atheists for Niebuhr" as well as to the Christian realists.[8] Moral Man presented a full-blown critique of liberal ethics, but it offered only a tantalizing foretaste of Niebuhr's later theology. "The book of 1932," concluded an early interpreter, "does not give us any clear picture of Niebuhr the theologian."[9]

The title of the treatise was a rather deceptive announcement of its central thesis which was elaborated in the opening paragraph of the Introduction. Niebuhr maintained that

> a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing.[10]

While he believed that individuals display a greater capacity for transcending self-interest than collectives, the book was hardly a glorification of human morality. In fact, Niebuhr hinted throughout that human nature was inherently limited and defective. The immorality of collectives ultimately depended upon the compounded sins of its individual members. The essential argument of the treatise was simply that group morality was inferior to individual morality. "In every human group," wrote Niebuhr, "there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships."[11] Considering the basic thrust of this argument, a more appropriate title would have been "Immoral Man and Even Less Moral Society."

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[8] Ahlstrom, "Continental Influence," p. 264.

[9] George Hammar, Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology (Uppsala, Sweden: A. -B. Lundequistska, 1940), p. 184.

[10] Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. xi.

The book, above all, was a highly charged polemic against religious and secular liberals who seemed "unconscious of the basic difference between the morality of individuals and the morality of collectives."[12] Niebuhr particularly disdained the ameliorative prescriptions of liberal moralists who believed that social injustice could be resolved through moral or rational suasion. These soft-headed thinkers did not recognize the inherent immorality of "collective egoism." Collective power exploited weakness, and could not be dislodged unless confronted with a counter-balance of power. The moralists who refused to come to grips with power politics were simply naive and unrealistic. With typical prescience, Niebuhr observed that American blacks would never win full justice in our predominantly white society unless they reinforced even their most insignificant demands with collective power. Likewise, industrial workers would never win concessions from the owners of industry without solidifying and coordinating their power base. In a group setting, power only respected power.[13]

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[11] Ibid., pp. xi-xii. Underlining added for emphasis by D.N.V.

[12] Niebuhr, "Preface" to the 1960 edition of Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. ix. After twenty-eight years, Niebuhr still defended the original thesis of the book.

[13] Niebuhr, Moral Man, 1932 edition, pp. xii, xv.

What was lacking among all the liberal moralists was "an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations." Niebuhr punctured the hopes of those who insisted that group egoism could be overcome through increases in social intelligence and moral goodwill. Human groups simply did not possess the inherent capacity for self-transcendence. "Given the inevitable limitations of human nature and the limits of the human imagination and intelligence," self-sacrifice was an ideal which could only be approximated by individuals; it was certainly "beyond the capacities of human societies."[14]

Only in the third chapter, which examined "The Religious Resources of the Individual for Social Living," did Niebuhr touch upon theological issues. He did this in a roundabout manner by adumbrating the twin weaknesses of Christian ethics---defeatism and sentimentalism.

Defeatism was regarded as the "besetting sin" of Christian orthodoxy. It was derived from a too consistent cosmic dualism in which the sins of the individual, and more particularly, the sins of the society, were deemed too worldly to be capable of moral salvation. The individual was "saved by the grace of God," while the society was "consigned to the devil." Social problems were thus declared insoluble from an ethical standpoint. Niebuhr admitted that the orthodox perception of society was realistic, but he scorned its defeatism and its degeneration into an individualistic "asocial quest for the absolute."[15]

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[14] Ibid., pp. xx, xxiv.

[15] Ibid., pp. 78, 70.

Along with such venerable fathers of the church as Augustine, Luther and Jonathan Edwards, the modern-day Barthians were also cited as religious defeatists. Niebuhr felt that the theology of crisis constituted a "revival of Lutheran orthodoxy" because of its extreme dualism. The distinction between righteous God and sinful man was so great that man was convicted, not of any particular breaches against the human community, "but of being human and not divine." Thus, creation and fall were merged, and social morality lost all significance. Niebuhr accused the Barthians of retreating from social and political questions. This type of withdrawal had historically resulted in Christendom's acceptance of slavery, injustice, inequality of wealth, and war "as ordained by the 'natural law' which God had devised for man's sinful state."[16]

The basic polemic of the chapter, however, was directed against religious liberalism. If the besetting sin of orthodoxy was defeatism, the particular vice of liberal Protestantism was sentimentalism, derived from a too consistent monism in which God and the world, the ideal and the real, were identified. "By adjusting its faith to the spirit of modern culture," wrote Niebuhr, liberalism had "imbibed the evolutionary optimism and the romantic overestimates of human virtue, which characterized the thought of the Enlightenment and of the Romantic Movement." American Christianity had been particularly susceptible to the optimism and sentimentalism inherent in modern culture because such thought suited the mood of this young and vigorous country---"youth usually being oblivious of the brutality which is the inevitable concomitant of vitality." While an expanding economy had obscured the cruelties of the class struggle, and isolation from Europe made international conflict less obvious, American Christianity thrived on a type of religious idealism which was saturated with "sentimental bathos." To illustrate his point, Niebuhr concocted a bathetic summary of contemporary liberalism:

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[16] Ibid., pp. 68, 76.

> In spite of the disillusionment of the World War, the average liberal Protestant Christian is still convinced that the kingdom of God is gradually approaching, that the League of Nations is its partial fulfillment and the Kellogg Pact its covenant, that the wealthy will be persuaded by the church to dedicate their power and privilege to the common good and that they are doing so in increasing numbers, that the conversion of individuals is the only safe method of solving the social problem, and that such ethical weaknesses as religion still betrays are due to its theological obscurantism which will be sloughed off by the progress of enlightenment.[17]

Niebuhr accused the liberal religion of hypocrisy as well as sentimentality. As privileged members of the middle class, liberals did not really suffer from "the brutalities of contemporary society." Incapable of understanding the real character of social injustice, they adopted a religious moralism which obscured the harsh cruelties of economic and political life. Niebuhr was not surprised, therefore, that with its ideal of love "in a civilization reeking with social injustice," liberal Protestantism "should be cynically judged of hypocrisy by those in whom bitter social experiences destroy the sentimentalities and illusions of the comfortable."[18]

In presenting the unacceptable polarities of Christian ethics, Niebuhr confronted his readers with the dialectical nature of religious thought.

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[17] Ibid., pp. 78-80.

[18] Ibid., pp. 62, 80.

The true Christian ethic was essentially paradoxical. It was an impossible possibility. Niebuhr employed this dialectic to summarize the chapter which he devoted to the social resources of religion. "Men must strive to realize their individual ideals in their common life," he wrote, "but they will learn that society remains man's great fulfillment and his great frustration."[19]

Despite the non-theological focus of Niebuhr's polemic, it is possible to detect some definite nods toward neo-orthodoxy. He began to move, for instance, in the direction of a qualified dualism. While he did not adopt a radical Kierkegaardian distinction between God and the world, between time and eternity, Niebuhr recognized the inherent weaknesses of philosophical monism and sought to pose a viable alternative. His doctrine of man also began to take shape. While Niebuhr did not dwell upon the sinful nature of man, it was apparent throughout that he held human nature in fairly low esteem. Furthermore, in castigating the liberal church for adjusting its ethical stance to suit middle-class perspectives, Niebuhr intimated that Christians should remain at a prophetic distance from culture. The church, on the other hand, should never retreat into the sort of ethical defeatism which Niebuhr associated with Barthianism. These theological tendencies were more fully adumbrated in Niebuhr's succeeding publications. Moral Man merely laid the groundwork for the sort of Christian realism which would characterize his later thought.

Considering the polemical nature of Niebuhr's treatise, it is not surprising that religious and secular liberals responded with a withering counterattack. Of all the American neo-orthodox manifestoes, Moral Man elicited the largest and the most agitated liberal response. In fact, the review articles alone constitute a fascinating historical study.[20]

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[19] Ibid., p. 82.

Niebuhr predicted in the Introduction to the treatise that his perspective would impress his liberal readers, "still pretty firmly enmeshed in the illusions and sentimentalities of the Age of Reason," as "unduly cynical."[21] It was a remarkably accurate assessment. A whole raft of reviewers maintained that Niebuhr had over-reacted to the post-war mood of despair and depression, and that his treatise was much too pessimistic concerning the moral future of humanity. Theodore C. Hume, writing for the Christian Century, called Niebuhr "a prophet of disillusion" and noted that his book was a telling commentary "on the temper of our time."[22] Shirley Jackson Case wrote from Chicago that Niebuhr was a "discouraged optimist" whose sense of hopelessness was "needlessly self-imposed." Under the "spell of pessimism," Niebuhr had recklessly discarded the only tools by which human society could ultimately be redeemed.[23] In a fairly sympathetic review for the World Tomorrow, Norman Thomas observed that Moral Man was at once "a sign of the times and a contribution to them." While Thomas agreed with Niebuhr's indictment of "the sentimentalists, romanticists and the believers in panacea," he was disturbed by the "degree of defeatism" which permeated the work. He would not accept Niebuhr's conclusion, moreover, "that man cannot make substantial progress in social justice without illusion."[24]

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[20] On the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Moral Man, James H. Smylie assessed its impact by focusing upon the reviews. See "Reinhold Niebuhr: Quadragesimo Anno," Religion in Life, 42 (Spring, 1973), pp. 25-36.

[21] Niebuhr, Moral Man, p. xxv.

[22] Theodore C. Hume, "Prophet of Disillusion," The Christian Century, 50 (Jan. 4, 1933), p. 18.

[23] Shirley Jackson Case, "Religion and Social Morals," The Journal of Religion, 13 (July, 1933), p. 361.

Striking the same note as Thomas, John Haynes Holmes, a prominent liberal pastor of the Community Church in New York, entitled his review "Religious Defeatism." Holmes was enthusiastic over Niebuhr's honest effort to discern a realistic understanding of society and human nature. But the result? "Such utter disillusionment that there is dismay along with enthusiasm in one's reaction." Holmes submitted that Niebuhr was so anxious to avoid the Scylla of sentimentality that he drove his craft straight into the Charybdis of defeatism, and thereby brought wreckage to his voyage. Moral Man was the acceptance of "the defeat of all man's best aims and hopes." Holmes counted the toll which defeatism had taken on Niebuhr's mind. "Dr. Niebuhr, an educator, says that education is vain; as a religionist, he says that religion must fail; a moralist, he surrenders right to expediency; a pacifist, he accepts force and violence." One needed only to compare this book with Rauschenbush's Christianity and the Social Crisis, lamented Holmes, "to see what has happened to our world."[25]

While Niebuhr's pessimism was the primary focus for the liberal counterattack, a number of peripheral issues also disturbed the reviewers. Niebuhr's assessment of the inevitability of social coercion and social conflict galled the pacifists. George A. Coe wrote that Niebuhr was turning control of the world over to "sheer, halterless force."[26] Another reviewer felt that the book was "a conflict philosophy of human society," which repeated "the errors of Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes."[27]

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[24] Norman Thomas, review of Moral Man, The World Tomorrow, 15 (Dec. 14, 1932), p. 565.

[25] John Haynes Holmes, "Religious Defeatism," The New York Herald Tribune Books, Jan. 8, 1933, p. 13.

A number of critics believed that Niebuhr had reverted to religious orthodoxy. Laurence Sears detected a "radical dualism" in Niebuhr's thought which was even sharper than the "Augustinian dichotomy between flesh and spirit."[28] The reviewer for the Christian Century heard "a strange echoing of the doctrine of human depravity" which the author refused to attach to every innocent babe, but which he loaded upon man's social nature.[29]

Charles A. Ellwood took direct aim at the thesis of the book, writing that most contemporary sociologists would assert that there was "no more inherent necessity of a group being immoral or brutal in its behavior than of individuals." He scolded the author for neglecting the scientific facts in the matter. It was "regrettable that Professor Niebuhr did not inform himself more fully as to the scientific standing of various social theories."[30]

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[26] George A. Coe, letter to The Christian Century, 50 (March 15, 1933), p. 362.

[27] Charles A. Ellwood, review of Moral Man, The American Journal of Sociology, 39 (Sept., 1933), p. 271.

[28] Laurence Sears, review of Moral Man, The Journal of Philosophy, 30 (Aug. 17, 1933), p. 469.

[29] Hume, "Prophet of Disillusion," p. 18.

[30] Ellwood, review of Moral Man, p. 271.

Niebuhr issued two rejoinders to his liberal critics.[31] The first was in the form of a "review of the reviews" which appeared in the World Tomorrow. Refusing to back away from the liberal challenge, Niebuhr essentially insisted that the reviewers had misinterpreted his realistic analysis because they were so deeply immersed in the optimistic illusions of American culture. The fact that his critics censured him for "defeatism" and "pessimism" merely proved "how completely we are still involved in the utopianism of the past two centuries."[32] The second rejoinder, published as a letter in Christian Century, was directed at George A. Coe. Coe's criticism was cited as "proof of the tenacity and stubbornness of a dying liberal culture." The fact that the great liberal educator could not comprehend the major focus of the treatise was demonstrated by his insistence that the author was a "defeatist." As a concluding riposte, Niebuhr employed a quote from a European review of Moral Man. "There is not a line of defeatism in the book. It seems defeatist only from the point of view of liberal illusions."[33]

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[31] Despite the heavy barrage of liberal criticism, there were a number of favorable responses. A. Herbert Haslam praised the book as "a realistic analysis" for a "morally impotent" age. See his review of Moral Man, The Crozer Quarterly, 10 (Oct., 1933), p. 496. Dorr Diefendorf insisted that the treatise was an authentic and stimulating assessment of the "tragic facts and devastating forces of modern life." See his review of Moral Man, The Drew Gateway, 4 (July, 1933), p. 12. And Elmer G. Homrighausen joyfully proclaimed that the book laid the foundation for "a new living theology, with an objective base in the reality of man, the world and God." See "Inspired by Niebuhr's book," a letter published in The World Tomorrow, 16 (Feb. 1, 1933), p. 118.

[32] Niebuhr, "Optimism and Utopianism," The World Tomorrow, 16 (Feb. 22, 1933), pp. 179-80.

[33] Niebuhr, letter to The Christian Century, 50 (March 15, 1933), pp. 363-64.

With the publication of Moral Man, Niebuhr became a marked man, the primary focus of an intense liberal counterattack.[34] Forged in the white heat of battle, then, Niebuhr's theology rapidly began to take shape. Within three years, the rather vague theological stance of Moral Man and Immoral Society was molded into a distinctive brand of American neo-orthodoxy.

In 1934, while the tremors created by Moral Man were still reverberating throughout the bastions of liberalism, Niebuhr released another realistic critique, Reflections on the End of an Era. Since this volume broke little new ground, it was very much overshadowed by the dynamic blockbuster of 1932. Lacking in structural cohesiveness and stylistic elegance, Reflections was certainly Niebuhr's least enticing publication during the early thirties.

In a short preface, Niebuhr explained that his "reflections" were "merely tracts for the times" which deserved more systematic treatment. Their publication was justified only because they raised such urgent issues for the present generation. The basic conviction which ran through the entire book was that "the liberal culture of modernity" was incapable of providing guidance and direction to a confused generation which confronted "the disintegration of a social system and the task of building a new one." Niebuhr then added, in an oft-quoted phrase, that adequate spiritual guidance could come through "a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions" than were comprehended in the contemporary culture. Realizing that an effort to combine political radicalism with traditional theology would strike the modern mind as "bizarre and capricious," Niebuhr did not expect his reflections to be widely acclaimed. He would be satisfied, therefore, if they would merely "help a little to shake the easy faith by which modern liberalism lives and through which the actual and tragic facts of contemporary history are. . .obscured."[35]

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[34] See, for instance, the rather acrimonious debate which ensued between Niebuhr and Charles Clayton Morrison. Niebuhr's indictment of liberal theology in "A Christian Philosophy of Compromise," [The Christian Century, 50 (June 7, 1933), pp. 746-48] touched off Morrison's defense, "Is Christianity Practicable?" [The Christian Century, 50 (June 21, 1933), pp. 805-807]. "An Editorial Conversation" extended the vigorous debate for two more issues. [The Christian Century, 50 (July 26 and Aug. 9, 1933), pp. 950-53, 1006-1008].

Niebuhr's "tracts for the times" were saturated with the mood of pessimism which the liberals detected in Moral Man. The book was punctuated by a definite litany of doom and gloom. Western civilization was a "dying social order" which could not be rescued from ultimate disintegration. The disease of the capitalistic culture was "organic and constitutional" and not a mere "functional ill which might be corrected by a slight change in policy or program." The anarchy of the World War was the "childhood disease of capitalism," and the world depression was "a revelation of its senility."[36]

Niebuhr insisted that the liberal mind had been rendered impotent as it faced this economic chaos and political crisis. Its thought-forms were outmoded. The Achilles' heel of the liberal system was its optimistic doctrine of man. Having placed too much faith in "the canons of reason and the dictates of conscience," liberalism had been blinded to the "tragic facts of human nature."[37] Because of its failure to come to grips with the profound nature of human sin, liberalism manufactured a superficial and optimistic social ethic, based upon progressive evolution.

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[35] Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, pp. ix-x.

[36] Ibid., pp. 19, 23-24, 28.

[37] Ibid., p. 48.

Liberalism's optimistic view of human nature also destroyed "the ethical and psychological basis for its supernatural theism." Since man possessed divine characteristics, liberal theism had essentially dissolved into a "naturalistic pantheism." Dissatisfied with radical monism and radical dualism, Niebuhr opted for the paradoxical conception of a "transcendent-immanent God." He realized that a God who was at once immanent and transcendent was a "rational absurdity" if one was to "transpose the original Jewish-Christian mythos of the creator and the creation into philosophical terms." But Niebuhr was willing to stand by this classical Christian conception because it put an "absolute perspective" on all human deeds. It supplied "a basis for optimism after it has entertained the most thoroughgoing pessimism."[38]

At this point, when Niebuhr seemed to be edging toward a renewed orthodoxy, he entered a caveat against the German dialectical theologians for their insistence upon radical transcendence. In their protests, these religious pessimists had too consistently renounced the "significance and virtue of human history from the perspective of the very ideal through which life has been saved from chaos and meaninglessness." Niebuhr warned that Barthian dualism provided the theistic rationale for social defeatism.[39]

Throughout most of the volume, Niebuhr seemed to be groping for a sound theological foundation upon which to lay his ethical superstructure.

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[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 201-204.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Although he was pleased with the realism inherent in Christian orthodoxy, Niebuhr feared that its social passion was too easily dulled by eschatological visions. He rested no more comfortably with religious orthodoxy than with religious liberalism. And, of course, doctrinaire Barthianism was anathema. Left without a theological home, Niebuhr "dialectically" bounced back and forth, condemning and condoning, but seldom coming to rest. Niebuhr's "reflections" demonstrated the turbulent development of a new theological perspective.

The volume stimulated surprisingly few critical reviews. Most of the reviewers were content to summarize the book and plead that, because of "limited space," an adequate critique would not be rendered. Perhaps Niebuhr was handled so gingerly because he had gained such prominence from Moral Man and Immoral Society. Perhaps his arguments were beginning to take root. At any rate, the critical response was quite disappointing.

Charles L. Street protested the line which Niebuhr drew between liberalism and radicalism, but admitted that his realism and pessimism, like that of Oswald Spengler, sounded a "healthy warning."[40] In an unusually irenic review for the Journal of Religion, Samuel C. Kincheloe pronounced Niebuhr to be a bit dogmatic regarding human nature, but otherwise lodged little protest.[41] One reviewer thought that the book assumed "a somewhat Pauline cast," but called the work "a much-needed tonic for disillusioned liberals."[42] Another warned that the readers would have to wait for several decades to discover whether this was really the "end" of an era, but he made no other observations than that the author was to be commended for including a useful index.[43] Even the review written by the editor of the Christian Century, Charles Clayton Morrison, was of little more critical value than the others. Morrison, who had previously engaged Niebuhr in some intellectual tussles, seemed inexplicably commendatory in an article entitled "Good Wholesome Pessimism." After singing Niebuhr's praises, Morrison wrote an extremely long and detailed summary of the book before admitting that there was not enough space for an adequate critique. He did complain that Niebuhr had been "wholly gratuitous" in charging liberalism with "childish absurdities," and that Niebuhr's doctrine of the ethical absolute appeared to be more rationalistic than realistic. But Niebuhr's muted antagonist concluded the review by imploring his readers to rally around this "clarion call" for a new social order.[44] All in all, it was a disappointing review to a disappointing book.

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[40] Charles L. Street, review of Reflections, The Anglican Theological Review, 16 (Oct., 1934), p. 315.

[41] Samuel C. Kincheloe, review of Reflections, The Journal of Religion, 15 (Jan., 1935), pp. 99-100.

With respect to theology, Niebuhr's most significant publication during the early thirties was An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. In the two earlier books, Niebuhr had been so preoccupied with political and economic questions that he failed to construct an adequate intellectual foundation for his social ethic. Moral Man and Reflections were nearly devoid of positive theological content. Perhaps this was due to the polemical bent of Niebuhr's mind. Perhaps it was due to a basic lack of interest in hard-core theological issues.

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[42] Herbert H. Field, review of Reflections, Religion in Life, 3 (Autumn, 1934), p. 624.

[43] Frank Grant Lewis, review of Reflections, The Crozer Quarterly, 11 (July, 1934), pp. 365-66.

[44] Charles Clayton Morrison, "Good Wholesome Pessimism," The Christian Century, 51 (March 7, 1934), pp. 323-24.

At any rate, the situation was dramatically rectified during the spring of 1934 when Niebuhr delivered the Rauschenbusch Memorial Lectures at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. Published the following year under a rather unprovocative title,[45] these lectures served to crystallize Niebuhr's early neo-orthodox thought, and they constituted an important bench mark in Niebuhr's intellectual development.

Despite its positive theological statement, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics was certainly not devoid of polemical thrust. Niebuhr's theology was always hammered out over-against liberalism and orthodoxy. He characteristically adopted the most extreme and brittle stereotypes of these opposing theological systems, attacked their weaknesses, gleaned their strengths, and let these stereotypes crumble under the weight of their own inadequacies.

A quintessential, dialectical polemicist, Niebuhr began the Rauschenbusch Lectures by playing orthodoxy off against liberalism. Despite its many superior insights, orthodox Christianity was unable to provide an adequate modern ethic because its truths were "imbedded in an outmoded science," and its morality was "expressed in authoritarian moral codes." On the other hand, liberalism had so thoroughly adjusted itself to the credos and prejudices of modern culture that it had obscured that which was "distinctive in the Christian message and creative in Christian morality." In accommodating to the modern mind, liberalism had obliterated the paradoxical relationship between the finite and the infinite and had destroyed the genius of true religion. It often "fell to the level of merely clothing the naturalistic philosophy and utilitarian ethics of modernity with pious phrases."[46]

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[45] John C. Bennett, an incisive Niebuhr-watcher, feared in 1937 that An Interpretation of Christian Ethics would be "passed by" because its title was not as catchy as those of his previous publications. See "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr," Religion in Life, 6 (Spring, 1937), p. 276. Bennett was probably correct, up to a point. While the lectures were hardly overlooked, the role they played in Niebuhr's intellectual biography has certainly been over-shadowed by Moral Man.

In opposition to both liberalism and orthodoxy, Niebuhr proposed an independent Christian ethic which was "concerned not only with immediate values and disvalues, but with the problem of good and evil, not only with immediate objectives, but with ultimate hopes." Niebuhr was convinced that the ethical vitality of religion depended upon the quality of its tension between the historical and the transcendent. The transcendent must truly transcend history so that no relative value or achievement may become the "basis for moral complacency." And at the same time, the transcendent must remain in organic contact with history so that "no degree of tension may rob the historical of its significance."[47]

Self-sacrificing and self-denying love described this independent Christian ethic. It was an absolute ethic, derived from unyielding allegiance to God. The demands of "the ethic of Jesus" could be justified in religious, but not in moral or social terms. Christians must forgive their fellows because God forgives. They must love their enemies because of God's impartial love. The points of reference must be vertical and not horizontal. Any effort to elaborate "the religious-moral thought of Jesus into a practical socio-moral thought would blunt the very vitality of his moral insights." The transcendental perspective is that which stimulates "moral vitality and unprudential rigorism."[48]

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[46] Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp. 4-5.

[47] Ibid., pp. 5, 9.

The ethic of Jesus maintained the tension between the historical and the transcendent. While pure love might be approximated in history, it was always beyond historical achievement because humans were never completely capable of sublimating egoism and attaining sacrificial passion. The ethic of Jesus transcended "the possible and historical." Paradoxically, however, it was not ultimately impossible because of an eschatological hope. The demands of Jesus proceeded from "a transcendent and divine unity of essential reality" so their final fulfillment would be possible "when God transmutes the present chaos of this world into its final unity."[49] The ethic of Jesus was an impossible possibility.

Niebuhr admitted that the absolute love ethic was always tempered by moral realism and pessimism. He criticized the implicit assumption of liberalism that human nature had the capacity to fulfill the demands of the gospel. Such a notion was blind and naive because it overlooked the sinful nature of man. Rationalistic liberalism had pantheized the universe, thereby obliterating the ethical as well as the metaphysical tension between

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[48] Ibid., pp. 46-48.

[49] Ibid., pp. 31, 56-57. Tillich's notion of "Kairos" or "fulfilled time" had obviously seeped into Niebuhr's ethical program. In the Preface, Tillich was credited with "many valuable suggestions" in the development of the theme.

God and man. Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, tended to increase the tension between the finite and the infinite, between the conditioned and the unconditioned, until the tension snapped. "Finite existence is left without meaning or significance, and eternity without content."[50]

The errors of these alternatives, claimed Niebuhr, could be rectified by a mythological interpretation of the problem of sin. The genius of prophetic Christianity was rooted in the myth of the Fall, whereby evil came into the world through human freedom and responsibility. It was neither ordained by God, nor an inevitable consequence of finite existence. In assigning the origin of evil to the predicament of human freedom, pitfalls of dualism and monism were avoided. Evil was not made good by attributing it to God, and nature was not made evil by deriving sin from finite existence.[51]

Essentially, then, Niebuhr defined moral evil in man as "rebellion against God." It was the attempt of man to "translate his finite existence into a more permanent and absolute form of existence." Blessed with the capacity to sense higher ideal possibilities, and blessed with freedom in his finite condition, man rails against his finitude and attempts to make himself God.[52]

An Interpretation of Christian Ethics was Niebuhr's first truly constructive theological effort. In a characteristically polemical and dialectical fashion, he molded some of the crucial motifs of American neo-orthodoxy. First, his social ethic depended upon a tension between the infinite and the finite, between God and man. Niebuhr's "transcendental ethics" assumed that God was sovereign and absolute. Second, he emphasized the defects and limitations of the human spirit. Man was a sinful being who could never achieve the pure demands of "the ethic of Jesus" without divine grace. Third, Niebuhr assailed the cultural capitulation of the modern church. The church could regain its vitality only by setting itself over-against the perversions and illusions of contemporary society. These motifs were the roots which supported Niebuhr's sprouting realistic theology.

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[50] Ibid., pp. 65, 71-72.

[51] Ibid., pp. 72-74.

[52] Ibid., pp. 84-85.

The treatise was quite cordially received by American liberals. Very few reviewers attempted to discredit its fundamental themes. Already in 1935, Niebuhr could claim some liberal converts. While one reviewer thought that Niebuhr's lectures were "needlessly erudite" and wondered whether Walter Rauschenbusch would have approved of an "impossible possibility,"[53] only Irl G. Whitchurch, writing for the Christian Century, seemed genuinely disturbed by the book. He criticized Niebuhr for loading his social ethics so heavily with theistic absolutes, harshly questioned his treatment of sin, and railed against his inadequate understanding of human reason. In light of these considerations, the reviewer decided that "an ethics deduced from a transcendental theology" would only lead the church down "a blind alley."[54]

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[53] W. A. Harper, review of An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Religious Education, 31 (April, 1936), p. 155.

[54] Irl G. Whitchurch, "Transcendental Ethics," The Christian Century, 53 (Jan. 1, 1935), pp. 19-20.

The most penetrating review was written by John C. Bennett for the Journal of Religion. Bennett observed that this work was Niebuhr's first attempt at a rounded interpretation of the Christian faith, and that his ethical system was more clearly presented than in his previous books. He noted that Niebuhr's thought always developed in the atmosphere of polemics. There were dangers in such an approach, as the author displayed a tendency "to force ideas to their logical extreme and then criticize them." Bennett questioned Niebuhr's uncritical use of myth and asked for more elaborate consideration of the church's role in the ethic of Jesus---"he leaves the individual Christian alone before God in a social mess." Generally, however, Bennett applauded the emerging outlines of Niebuhr's thought, which he saw as an attempt to delineate a "social gospel" for "periods of despair as well as periods of hope."[55]

Walter Marshall Horton: A Realistic Theology

Walter Marshall Horton was unquestionably one of the rising young stars of American religious liberalism during the late twenties and early thirties. A product of Harvard, Columbia and New York's Union Seminary, Horton had obtained a staunch liberal pedigree long before he was appointed to succeed Henry Churchill King as Fairfield Professor of Theology at Oberlin in 1926.[56] At Oberlin, Horton quickly published a number of books and articles which established him as a leading spokesman for liberal theology.[57] During the early thirties, however, he began to question the liberal conception of God, and soon became a major participant in the "internal critique" of religious liberalism in America.[58]

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[55] John C. Bennett, review of An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, The Journal of Religion, 16 (April, 1936), pp. 212-14.

[56] For a delightful account of Horton's initial encounter with liberal thought see Horton, "Rough Sketch of a Half Formed Mind," in Vergilius Ferm, ed., Contemporary American Theology: Theological Autobiographies, Vol. I (New York: Round Table Press, 1932), pp. 161-88.

Early in his career, Horton had rejected philosophical idealism in favor of the empirical realism which was being espoused by Henry Nelson Wieman and Douglas Clyde Macintosh.[59] However, it was not until 1934 and the publication of his Realistic Theology that Horton adopted the sort of "Christian realism" which Reinhold Niebuhr was formulating in his early neo-orthodox books. Realistic Theology constituted a dramatic shift in the direction of Horton's thought.

In the Preface, Horton acknowledged his intellectual debts. Above all, the book was to be regarded as a direct response to "After Liberalism---What?", a searching article which John C. Bennett had written during the fall of 1933 for the Christian Century. Horton found himself in substantial agreement with Bennett's assertion that liberal theology had collapsed and needed to be replaced by an alternative which was more attuned to the realistic temper of the times. In fact, Horton admitted that he had kept the article at his elbow throughout the writing of the book, employing it as an intellectual blueprint. Not surprisingly, the book was dedicated to the young professor at Auburn Seminary.[60]

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[57] Three of his early books were especially acclaimed by the liberals. Theism and the Modern Mood (1930); A Psychological Approach to Theology (1931); and Theism and the Scientific Spirit (1933). In varying manners, each defended liberalism against its cultured despisers, particularly the humanists and naturalists.

[58] See Chapter II of this dissertation.

[59] In 1930, Horton enthusiastically embraced the new empirical theology of Macintosh, Wieman, Lyman and Hocking. He agreed with these thinkers that God was to be regarded, "not as a Being behind and apart from the world of human experience, but rather as a Being revealed in human experience, a Dependable Factor in it which can be isolated by scientific analysis just as one isolates chemical elements or bacteria or vitamines." Theism and the Modern Mood, p. 97.

Besides Bennett, Horton aligned himself with the writings of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Tillich's "belief-ful Realism," outlined in The Religious Situation (1932), was praised as a vibrant new interpretation of the Christian faith which could attract former conservatives as well as former liberals. And with Niebuhr, Horton confessed that the exigencies of the times were driving him "politically to the left" and "theologically to the right," bringing him, therefore, "into simultaneous relations of sympathy with Christian orthodoxy on the one hand and with social radicalism on the other."[61]

The basic configurations of Horton's theological perspective emerged in the first and crucial chapter, "The Decline of Liberalism and the Rise of Realism." A brilliant analyst and an eloquent writer, Horton constructed an utterly devastating critique of liberalism. He pointed out, first of all, that "something calamitous" had happened to liberal theology since the end of the World War. At that time liberals had been self-confident and aggressive in their attempts to reconcile the Gospel to contemporary culture, convinced that it was possible to be at once "thoroughly modern and thoroughly Christian." The self-assurance of the liberals, however, seemed to have "melted away." In the past they had criticized the theological obscurantists for clinging to outmoded thought-forms; now they were "beating their own breasts and lamenting their errors." Pursued by the fundamentalists on the right flank and the humanists on the left flank, the liberals had allowed defeat to become a rout. "Their morale has cracked, rebellion and desertion are rife within their ranks, and the greater part of their forces are ready to 'flee when no man pursueth.'"[62]

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[60] Horton, Realistic Theology (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), p. ix. Apparently, Bennett was rather astonished by Horton's enthusiasm for the article. Soon after Realistic Theology was published, he wrote Horton a letter of appreciation, acknowledging that being associated with the book was the greatest honor he had ever received. "It puffs me up in my worse moments and encourages me in a wholesome way in my better moments." But he confessed that he was somewhat baffled by Horton's estimation of the article's significance. "I cannot understand why you should go out of your way to make so much of that article," wrote Bennett, "but it is good of you to do it." John Bennett, letter to Horton, November 21, 1934.

[61] Horton, Realistic Theology, p. ix.

Horton attributed the disintegration of religious liberalism to the collapse of secular liberalism. In its endeavor to modernize the gospel, liberalism had accepted a compromising alliance with the presuppositions, prejudices and illusions of bourgeois Western thought. Since the cataclysmic events of the past decades had caused a general change in the intellectual climate, liberal theology had become impotent and outmoded. "Having completely assimilated the characteristic ideas of a particular era in history," wrote Horton, "it was foredoomed to perish with the passing of the era." While he warned that it would be imprudent to consign liberal concepts to the dump-heap before new ones emerged, it was plain that they were dead concepts---"as dead as the shibboleths of the Gnostics and the Arians, though they have just died and their flesh is still warm."[63]

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[62] Ibid., pp. 1-2.

[63] Ibid., pp. 5, 8.

Horton's perspective, of course, was very much colored by the mood of crisis which pervaded this country during the early years of the Depression. He believed that with the passing of the liberal era, American society was standing zwischen den Zeiten, "between eras." During the "petulant fling" of the twenties (a "debauch of individualism and self-expression"), it was quite natural to hope that America might assume the tasks of remaking civilization which were interrupted by the War. But now that five years of economic stagnation and social distress had "cleared our heads and sharpened our vision," it was evident that American society could never return to pre-war "normalcy." Neither the war, nor the emotional storm of the twenties, nor the depression of the early thirties could be viewed as a "mere episode," for these events were "the first tremendous indications of a great turn in the stream of history," the dawning of a new era which was without chart or compass. The Great War was merely "the curtain raiser in this new drama," and the Jazz Age,

> with its fantastic mood of bitter bravado, was only a 'Strange Interlude' with which our minds were temporarily distracted while the stage carpenters were hammering away, setting the scenery for the main performance which has just begun, and whose plot so far is hard to unravel.[64]

While Horton could not unravel the plot for the new era, he was certain that "realism" would be the key concept for interpreting its dominant spirit and temper. He noted that realistic movements had already emerged in the realms of politics, philosophy and literature. Each of these forms of realism held in common

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[64] Ibid., p. 6.

> a certain temper of mind which craves objectivity and fears subjectivism; which prefers objective realities, however disagreeable, to subjective fancies, however glorious; and which means to be guided by these realities in every form of human quest, whether for truth, or for artistic beauty, or for political stability and progress.

Horton perceived, then, that America was about to enter an "age of realism."[65]

The quest for realism had also affected the realm of theology. While he acknowledged numerous forms of contemporary religious realism,[66] Horton focused upon the European theology of crisis which was described as a "violent revulsion" against the subjectivism, the monistic idealism and the world-affirming optimism of Schleiermacher's theology which had dominated Europe for more than a century. Horton felt that the Barthian critique of liberalism was instructive, but far too extreme. Crisis theology, he wrote,

> negates the nineteenth century so vehemently that it practically drives God out of recent history, and opposes liberal theology so antithetically that it manages to be wrong wherever liberal theology is wrong---but in an opposite sense.

American theology, having only become free from the shackles of orthodoxy, could hardly be expected to take to its heart a movement whose slogan was "Back to Calvin." Despite the inherent realism in Barthian thought, Americans would never revert to the theology of their forefathers.[67]

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[65] Ibid., pp. 10-12.

[66] Ibid., pp. 13-14. He especially noted the "belief-ful realism" of Paul Tillich, the Platonic realism of William Temple and A. E. Taylor, the empirical realism of Macintosh and Wieman and the political realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. Horton also referred to an American symposium of religious realists, Religious Realism, edited by Douglas Clyde Macintosh (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931). Horton and H. Richard Niebuhr were two of the many contributors.

[67] Ibid., pp. 13-15, 37. Horton acknowledged later that his realistic theology differed from his liberal theology because it had "passed through Barth's thunder and lightning," but he always rejected the notion that he was a Barthian. See Horton, "How Barth Has Influenced Me," Theology Today, 13 (Oct., 1956), pp. 359-60.

Having slain the giants of liberalism and Barthianism in the brilliant introductory chapter, Horton devoted the remainder of his book to the formulation of a realistic theology. The concluding chapters took the form of a handbook for nascent religious realists. Not surprisingly, Horton insisted that the starting point for a realistic theology was a realistic assessment of the human predicament. Determined not to be fooled by idealistic illusions, realism must begin "by surveying all the difficulties and obstacles that stand in the way of man's salvation." In this respect, realism closely resembled orthodox Christianity which had a profound grasp of the nature of man. The liberals were wrong to assume that ignorance was the root of evil and that it could be uprooted by creative intelligence. The problem of evil resided at a much deeper level. "We are in a predicament," wrote Horton, "because of that weakness, division, and perversion of the will, that preference of the lesser to the greater good which theology calls sin." If man was ever to be saved, it was necessary, first of all, for him to recognize the deep-rooted nature of human evil.[68]

Considering the attention Horton had paid to the doctrine of God in his earlier publications, it is ironic that there was not a direct discussion of divine nature in Realistic Theology. The doctrine of God came up indirectly, however, in a chapter devoted to the kingdom of God. He blasted the liberals for reversing the relationship of man and God put forth by the New Testament conception of the kingdom. During the liberal period, God, not man, was the silent and passive partner in building the kingdom on earth. God was invited to lend a hand, if he would, to speed up the job, but human providence sketched the plans. Faith in God was a tenet of the liberal social creed, but it was held tentatively, and only on a pragmatic basis. God was important in so far as he worked to aid man in the building of the kingdom. Realists, on the other hand, perceived that it was God's kingdom and not man's, governed by an often inscrutable Providence, "whose workings man must humbly seek to discern, if his small efforts are to count at all."[69]

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[68] Ibid., pp. 42, 56, 77.

Horton held to a high doctrine of the Christian church. Since it was a primary channel through which the grace of God flowed, the church was endowed with the particular mission of sharing that divine grace with other secular institutions and secular movements. It had become apparent to Horton, however, that the modern church had adjusted its thought to the mind of modern science and the mores of Western culture, rendering its spiritual resources impotent during the present period of crisis and despair. The lesson to be learned was that the church must remain in constant tension with the world, avoiding alliance, accommodation and assimilation. While Horton preferred to avoid both extremes, he maintained that the extreme of unworldliness was preferable to the extreme of worldliness. "Better for the church to be a persecuted minority, a saving remnant in a hostile society, better for her to be crucified with Christ, than for her to curry favor with the political powers that ordered the crucifixion."[70]

Realistic Theology was a significant contribution to early American neo-orthodoxy. While Horton later adopted a theological stance which he described as "neo-liberalism,"[71] there is little doubt that this book crackled with the motifs of neo-orthodoxy. Along with a brilliant indictment of liberalism, Horton offered "antidotes" to liberal theology based upon a realistic understanding of human nature, the providence of God and the church's relationship to its environment. Horton's aversion to Barth, moreover, was thoroughly consistent with the perspective of the Niebuhrian strain of American neo-orthodoxy.

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[69] Ibid., pp. 154-55.

[70] Ibid., pp. 175-76.

When Realistic Theology appeared in 1934, Horton's critics and friends agreed that a major change had taken place in his thinking. Those radicals and liberals who had consistently acclaimed his earlier publications quickly labeled Horton a turncoat theologian. He wrote later that his radical friends "began to mourn me as one lost," while his liberal friends "were inclined to view my new position with some indignation, as a kind of betrayal of the cause they supposed me to be serving."[72] One of Horton's distinguished mentors at Union Seminary, George A. Coe, was so disturbed by the book that he fired off a remarkable six-page letter in which he documented the apparent inconsistencies in the new theological perspective of his brilliant student. Coe noted paternalistically that the defiant and exclamatory tone of the book revealed intellectual immaturity. "You have not reached equilibrium," Coe wrote. "You have not quite found yourself---but are still in process of tearing yourself loose from your former theological and possibly your religious self." Coe felt that Horton's realism was a result of "objective observation and romantic interpretation." In a day of strong emotion, there was a great temptation for theologians to objectify the ideas which most plausibly systematize excitement. Much realism was therefore superficial. Coe also felt that Horton's diagnosis of the human predicament was extreme. He suspected that Horton did not really mean to defend the dire analysis of human nature laid out in Realistic Theology, but that it was only offered "as a smarty liniment that we need to have rubbed into us."[73]

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[71] Horton adopted the term "neo-liberalism" because of his aversion to Barth's "neo-orthodoxy." Horton, letter to Advance, 149 (March 8, 1957), p. 23. Also see Horton, "Liberalism Old and New," Eugene William Lyman Lecture in the Philosophy of Religion, delivered at Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia, November 14, 1952.

[72] Horton, "Between Liberalism and the New Orthodoxy," p. 637.

Roderick Scott, a missionary-educator assigned to Fukien Province in South China, was utterly alarmed by the new direction of Horton's thought. Realistic Theology smacked of "Marxism, Barthianism and Niebuhrism," a strange combination for one who was supposedly a standard-bearer of liberal thought. After explaining the local Chinese conviction that you get strong when you eat tiger flesh, Scott reversed the figure to suit his perception of Horton's "theological cannibalism." "Some of you American writers seem to be getting weak by swallowing the arguments of your enemies."[74]

The reviews of Realistic Theology were interesting and suggestive. While the Niebuhr brothers applauded Horton's devastating analysis of liberalism and his attempt at a realistic critique, they urged him on toward even more radical conclusions. Reinhold felt that Horton returned to a "pretty consistent moralistic liberalism" by refusing to advocate that the church become involved in the class conflict.[75] H. Richard Niebuhr added that the book began realistically enough, but that the later chapters less candidly faced "the stubborn, perplexing and disheartening facts about Christ, the church and human plans for self-help." He lamented, moreover, that the author "has not given us a realistic theology in the sense in which he defines realism."[76]

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[73] George A. Coe, letter to Horton, Jan. 14, 1935. The Horton Papers have been deposited in the Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.

[74] Roderick Scott, letter to Horton and Eugene W. Lyman, Aug. 3, 1935.

The liberal reviewers, on the other hand, seemed astonished that Horton would have written such a thorough indictment of liberalism. They were unwilling to lose him for the liberal cause. In a review for the Christian Century entitled "Self-Critical Liberalism," Harris Franklin Rall was convinced that Horton's attack on liberalism was "confusing rather than helpful," and that it would only "confirm reactionism and lazy obscurantism in those who grasp at phrases and do not follow the argument."[77] Arthur Cushman McGiffert was certain that Horton's realistic theology was merely "modified liberalism." The Oberlin professor would not associate with those "former liberals" who had concluded with traditional orthodoxy that there was "no health in us." Despite Horton's scorching attack, McGiffert was convinced that at heart Horton remained a liberal. "His realistic bark is mostly in his title."[78]

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[75] Reinhold Niebuhr, review of Realistic Theology, The Intercollegian and Far Horizons, 52 (Dec., 1934), pp. 88-89.

[76] H. Richard Niebuhr, review of Realistic Theology, Religion in Life, 4 (Spring, 1935), pp. 311-12.

[77] Harris Franklin Rall, "Self-Critical Liberalism," The Christian Century, 55 (Jan. 2, 1935), pp. 21-22.

[78] Arthur Cushman McGiffert, review of Realistic Theology, The Journal of Religion, 15 (July, 1935), pp. 333-35.

One liberal, however, took *Realistic Theology* at its face value. Edward Scribner Ames attacked the book as an extremely pessimistic analysis of the human predicament which he viewed as a direct theological reaction to post-war catastrophic events. "The realistic theology," Ames complained, "appears as a backwash from the tragedy of the war and a 'failure of nerve' in times of depression." Ames turned Horton's indictment of liberalism around. Realistic theology was time-bound, a reaction to particular historical events. Viewed from distant perspective, liberalism would survive while realistic theology was merely "a passing episode, salutary in certain of its criticisms and emphases, but yet only an eddy in the main stream."[79]

H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck and Francis P. Miller: The Church Against the World

The proponents of early American neo-orthodoxy persistently condemned the liberal church for its alleged capitulation to contemporary culture. Again and again, the liberals were castigated for sacrificing the vitals of the Christian faith on the altar of modernity. As an antidote to such unwholesome accommodation, the leaders of the neo-orthodox movement proposed that the church declare its independence from secular culture. This dominant motif was most clearly announced and most fully adumbrated in 1935 when H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck and Francis P. Miller contributed essays to *The Church Against the World*.

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[79] Edward Scribner Ames, "The Human Predicament," *Christendom*, 1 (Oct., 1935), pp. 179-81.

The prime mover behind the symposium was Niebuhr, an associate professor of Christian ethics at Yale, who wrote the introduction as well as the significant concluding essay. Like his famous older brother, Niebuhr came to neo-orthodoxy by way of religious liberalism. Even before he went to Yale for graduate study during the early twenties, Niebuhr's writings were flavored by a form of evangelical liberalism which was in concert with the American Social Gospel.[80] At Yale, his liberalism moved in a different direction when Douglas Clyde Macintosh guided him toward the historical relativism of Ernst Troeltsch.[81] For a time, at least, Niebuhr was very strongly influenced by Troeltsch. His first book, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929), was definitely inspired by Troeltsch's Social Teachings of the Christian Churches (first German edition, 1912).[82]

Between 1930-1935, however, a decisive shift occurred in Niebuhr's thinking. His liberal perspective was severely challenged and reshaped during this period of social, religious and personal crisis.[83] Before moving from Eden Seminary to the Yale Divinity School in 1931, Niebuhr took a sabbatical trip to Europe where he became profoundly acquainted with Barthianism as well as the social, economic and political conditions which made its message so powerful and meaningful.[84] When he returned to America, Niebuhr was prepared, not only to translate the subtle thought of Paul Tillich (The Religious Situation, 1932), but also to formulate his own "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment."[85]

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[80] See Niebuhr's three earliest articles, all published by his denominational journal, Magazin für Evangelische Theologie und Kirche: "An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought," Vol. 48 (Jan., 1920), pp. 39-44; "The Alliance Between Labor and Religion," Vol. 49 (May, 1921), pp. 197-203; and "Christianity and the Social Problem," Vol. 50 (July, 1922), pp. 278-91. While all of Niebuhr's articles were printed in English, the journal did not relinquish its German title until 1927.

[81] His doctoral dissertation at Yale was a study of "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion." James W. Fowler, the most incisive interpreter of Niebuhr's early thought, believes that the thesis topic was an act of self-definition and commitment. See Fowler, "The Development and Expression of 'the Conviction of the Sovereignty of God' in H. Richard Niebuhr's Thought" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1971), p. 16.

[82] Niebuhr has acknowledged his debt to Troeltsch. He perceived that Christ and Culture was an extension and a correction of Social Teachings. See Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. ix-x. In the Preface to The Meaning of Revelation, Niebuhr designated Troeltsch and Barth as his "teachers." See The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), p. x.

In his introduction to the three major articles which comprised The Church Against the World, Niebuhr informed the readers that the title was not so much the enunciation of a theme or a thesis, but the declaration of a position during a time of crisis.[86] Having accommodated its faith and its mission to the standards imposed by secular culture, the modern church had become socially inept and spiritually impotent. Convicted of heeding the demands of culture rather than the demands of God, the Christian community was faced with a crisis of survival. What must the church do to be saved? How could it regain its spiritual vitality and social vigor?

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[83] Niebuhr has indicated that the years between 1930 and 1935 were decisive for the formulation of his mature religious convictions and theological orientations. His break with liberal and empirical theology rested upon a growing conviction of "the sovereignty of God." See Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," The Christian Century, 77 (March 2, 1960), pp. 248-51.

[84] Despite the fact that Niebuhr hailed Barth as one of his "teachers," he never became a Barthian. Fowler believes that Barth's influence on Niebuhr's thought has been over-played, insisting that Tillich was much more important. See Fowler, "The Development," footnote, page 48.

[85] The title of the Alumni Lecture which Niebuhr delivered at Yale in 1931. Among the other writings which reveal the neo-orthodox bent of Niebuhr during the early thirties are "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," in Religious Realism (1931), pp. 413-28; "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," unpublished paper read before the American Theological Society, New York, April 21, 1933. In possession of Mrs. H. Richard Niebuhr and Richard R. Niebuhr. Cited by their permission; and "Man the Sinner," The Journal of Religion, 15 (July, 1935), pp. 272-80.

[86] H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, and Francis P. Miller, The Church Against the World (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Co., 1935), p. 1.

In this moment of crisis, wrote Niebuhr, the three contributors agreed that the church could only save itself by turning "away from its temporal toward its eternal relations." By being true to God, and thereby true to itself, the church would become fit for its work in the world. Each of the essays was to be regarded as a unique contribution to that all-important "task of the Christian community in defining and taking its position against the world."[87]

Wilhelm Pauck submitted the first essay, an analysis of "The Crisis of Religion." The church historian at Chicago Theological Seminary noted that seldom had men been so disillusioned as they were during the present period in history. The catastrophe of the twentieth century had shaken the very roots of Western civilization, leaving it in a state of disintegration and despair. At its heart, the cultural crisis was a religious crisis because modern man had lost confidence in those institutions which nourished and expressed the religious spirit. Indeed, the church had lost confidence in itself; it was unsure of its message and its mission.[88]

Pauck surveyed the spiritual options which were available to crisis-ridden modern man. He discounted a number of inadequate "religions" which had arisen to interpret the meaning of existence. The fundamentalists could not be considered seriously because they clung to the past, "refusing to consider the causes and forces which have produced the modern critical conditions." And while the humanists were viewed as representing modern religion, their failure to recognize the numinous factor of life circumscribed their quest for religious meaning. Pauck doubted that humanism even deserved to be called a religion because it was not linked to the divine, "but merely to a cause or causes proposed by men for the improvement of their station." Humanism was merely a remnant of true religion in which only the spirit of devotion is retained.[89]

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[87] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[88] Ibid., pp. 17, 24.

Pauck did not believe that modernism (or liberalism) offered a solution for the present religious crisis either. In its attempts to reinterpret the faith in the light of modern knowledge, modernism had adopted a world-view which was dramatically out of accord with the true character of Christianity. The foremost doctrine of modernism was "the autonomy of man." Ultimately, it approached religion from the point of view of anthropology, and therefore, had "lost God." Furthermore, modernism offered no definite religious authority. It was by nature a questing religion, incapable of eliciting confidence and assurance.[90]

Pauck was more sympathetic toward the Barthians who offered "a new Christian thought, based upon a new application and a rediscovery of the phenomenon of revelation." He was by no means uncritical of the theology of crisis. The problems of going back behind secularism were almost insurmountable. The modern religious consciousness found the Barthian conception of revelation incoherent. Furthermore, the theology of crisis was so deeply enmeshed "in theological sophistry and dialectics" that it was indecipherable to lay-persons who simply considered it "a repristination of Christian conservatism."[91]

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[89] Ibid., pp. 37, 46.

[90] Ibid., p. 57.

In one respect, Pauck felt that Barthianism had pointed toward an escape from the religious crisis. The crisis theology was applauded because it put God and man in proper perspective---God in heaven and man on earth! Convinced that life was meaningful only when qualified by theonomous rather than autonomous decisions and judgments, Pauck concluded his essay with a ringing call for "a new sense of God." He believed that a new awareness of divine transcendence would break the strangle hold of secularism:

> Perhaps the time is not far distant when a prophet will rise among us who, fully imbued with the mood and spirit of our era, will speak to us in the name of the living God with such power and authority that all who long for salvation will be compelled to listen. In the meantime we must learn to be humble in the awareness that it is God, the Lord of all Life, who has laid his hand upon us in this crisis.[92]

The second essay was written by Francis P. Miller, a Presbyterian layman who was serving as the Chairman of the World's Student Christian Federation in Geneva, Switzerland. It was Miller's great concern that the Protestant church was being enslaved by national cultures. Nationalism was Miller's bête noire.

Miller observed that nationalism had fractured the universal frame of reference for Protestantism. Without a universal perspective capable of transcending a particular culture, the church had ceased to be a reliable witness to its true mission and its true responsibility. Miller suggested that American Protestantism was just as domesticized as European Protestantism. Despite the relative youth of our country, the foundations had been laid for a religion which was "American rather than Christian, national rather than universal." The culture religion of America had certain obvious characteristics. It was empirical, humanistic, idealistic, activistic, humanitarian and missional. While its distant roots were in the Christian ethic, its spiritual insights were derived from a particular American culture rather than the universal Christian faith. In fact the national religion of America and universal Christianity were perceived as "diametrically opposite positions."[93]

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[91] Ibid., pp. 60-66.

[92] Ibid., pp. 67, 69.

Miller isolated John Dewey as the "high priest" of America's national religion. While Dewey would be horrified at the suggestion that he was playing into the hands of nationalistic forces, there was little doubt, Miller wrote, that Dewey's book, _A Common Faith_, promulgated a culture religion. Dewey's religion was based upon a Rousseauean doctrine of man---"all men everywhere are naturally good." This doctrine of human dignity was scored by Miller as "the curse of the age in which we live." It had produced an attitude that man himself was "the end-all and be-all of existence," a notion which had "filled the world with cults of blood and race and nation."[94] Miller perceived that Dewey's common faith had seeped into America's liberal Protestant community. Henry Nelson Wieman and

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[93] _Ibid_., pp. 90, 103-105.

[94] _Ibid_., pp. 106-13.

Archibald Baker[95] were singled out as examples of liberals who had absorbed Dewey's arguments.

To avoid domestication, Miller believed that national churches needed to be constantly aware of the universal and historical doctrines of the Christian faith. The church needed to be reminded that God could not be subjected to the whims and fancies of man. God was transcendent, beyond man's reach. God was creator; man was creature. By his very nature, man was separated from the realm of God. Even in his most exalted moments, man was "tainted by sin." Miller concluded that these key doctrines of the universal faith were "equally good and true for all men, everywhere and in all times." They were elements of absolute and eternal value which could never be prostituted by a particular culture.[96]

Niebuhr's concluding essay was an articulate argument for the church's independence from contemporary culture. Always a keen observer of the church's relation to civilization, he noted at the outset that the history of this relationship was marked by cyclical periods of conflict, alliance and identification. A converted church in a corrupt civilization would withdraw to its upper rooms and issue forth a campaign of aggressive evangelism. At the first signs of repentance and faith, the church would relax its strictures against culture and enter into a comfortable alliance. As generations passed, however, the faith of the converted culture would lose its force and vitality---discipline would relax, repentance would grow formal, and corruption would enter with idolatry. The church, tied to the culture which it sponsored, would suffer concomitant corruption. Having come full circle, only a new period of withdrawal, followed by a new period of aggressive evangelism, would save the church and restore the salt by which it savored society.[97]

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[95] Baker had written Christian Missions and a New World Culture in 1934, a book which defined "religion as a phase of cultural development, and missions as one aspect of a more general process of cultural interpretation." Quoted by Miller, Ibid., p. 113.

[96] Ibid., pp. 75-80.

Along with the other contributors to The Church Against the World, Niebuhr was convinced that the modern church had been miserably corrupted by its alliance with contemporary Western civilization. It was the task of the present generation of Christians, therefore, to liberate the church from its cultural bondage in order that it might once again become a seasoning agent for social salvation.

The church was in bondage to capitalism. Niebuhr described capitalism as an idolatrous faith by which the values and virtues of society (nature, love, life, truth, beauty and justice) become exploited and made servants of the "high economic good."

> It fashions society into an economic organization in which production for profit becomes the central enterprise, in which the economic relations of men are regarded as their fundamental relations, in which economic privileges are most highly prized, and in which the resultant classes of men are set to struggle with one another for the economic goods.

Nothing could be more antithetical to the gospel than the faith of capitalism. Yet the bonds between capitalism and Protestantism were so intimate that "the genealogists have suspected kinship." Moreover, the entanglement with capitalism appeared in the great economic interests of the church---in its debt structure, in its dependence upon endowments, in its reliance upon gifts from the privileged classes. The church had sold its soul in order to secure thirty pieces of silver from the capitalistic system.[98]

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[97] Ibid., pp. 123-24.

The church was also in bondage to nationalism. Like capitalism, nationalism had become a pseudoreligion because it regarded the nation "as the supreme value, the source of all life's meaning, as an end-in-itself and a law to itself." The nation-god, with its insatiable lust for power and expansion, was a constant source of conflict, war and destruction. While the Christian faith had developed as a revolution against the nationalistic religions of Israel and Rome, Niebuhr observed that the modern church had compromised this once defiant stance. "The confusion of democracy and the Christian ideal of life in America, of racialism and the gospel in Germany, of Western nationalism and church missions in the Orient" were cited as vivid testimonies to present-day corruption of a once universalistic faith.[99]

Capitalism and nationalism were designated as variant forms of "anthropocentrism," the predominant religion of modern civilization. Niebuhr chose the technical term "anthropocentrism" because it described the prevailing faith more accurately than "humanism," "liberalism," or "modernism." It constituted the affirmation of man's utter self-sufficiency. It marked the rejection not only of the symbols of the creation, the fall and the atonement, but also of the "belief in human dependence and limitation, in human wickedness and frailty, in divine forgiveness through the suffering of the innocent." Anthropocentrism had emerged from the success of science and technology in understanding and controlling the conditions of life. Seizing upon human achievements, it inevitably "glorified the moral sense of man as his natural possession and taught him that he needed no other law than the one within."[100]

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[98] Ibid., pp. 128-32. This critique was obviously informed by a Marxian analysis. Niebuhr, however, attacked the corruptions of communism as well as the corruptions of capitalism. See footnote, page 130.

[99] Ibid., pp. 133-35.

Niebuhr observed that the church's capitulation to anthropocentrism had developed gradually over the past centuries. Finally, however, faith in man had become a substitute for faith in God. All the attributes of the Godhead were being posited in the contemporary conception of human nature. By bowing to anthropocentrism the church was worshiping a false idol, for idolatry appeared

> wherever finite and relative things or powers are regarded as ends-in-themselves, where man is treated as existing for his own sake, where civilization is valued for civilization's sake, where art is practiced for art's sake, where life is lived for life's sake or nation adored for nation's sake.[101]

As an antidote to idolatrous anthropocentrism, Niebuhr proposed that the church disengage itself from its corrupting alliance with contemporary civilization. He unveiled an outline for the church's declaration of independence. It began and ended with the self-evident truth that all life was dependent upon a sovereign God. "There is no flight out of the captivity of the church," declared Niebuhr, "save into the captivity of God." True emancipation would begin when the church was prepared to surrender itself to the reality and the power of God. The crisis of modern man was like the crisis of Israel during the era of the prophets, like the crisis of the Roman Empire during the era of Augustine, and like the crisis of Medieval Europe during the era of the Reformers. Man's final appeal must be made beyond all finite principalities and powers, beyond the rights of men, nations and religions "to the right of God."[102]

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[100] Ibid., pp. 136-37.

[101] Ibid., pp. 138, 125.

Niebuhr concluded with the warning that it would not be easy for the church to divorce itself from the world. As a revolutionary community in a pre-revolutionary society, the main task of the church was to prepare for the divine revolution in life. Yet there was always the necessity of participation in the affairs of an unconverted and unreborn culture. This dual character of the church's strategy was in "constant danger of being resolved into the monism of other-worldliness or of this-worldliness, into a more or less quiescent expectancy of a revolution beyond time or of a mere reform program carried on in terms of the existent order." The church was always confronted with the problem of how to be "in the world and yet not of the world."[103]

Despite this warning, Niebuhr insisted that the future of the church depended upon its capacity to free itself from the bondage of modern culture. It was time for the corrupted church to become liberated from a corrupted culture. It was time for a new period of withdrawal and aggression in order that a converted church might sprinkle newly savored salt upon an unregenerate society. It was time to make this unequivocal declaration: the church against the world!

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[102] *Ibid.*, pp. 149-51.

[103] *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.

The Church Against the World reverberated with its titular motif. All three contributors persistently proclaimed the prevailing theme---negatively, by condemning the liberal church for cultural capitulation, and positively, by declaring the church's independence. This does not mean, however, that the other major motifs of American neo-orthodoxy were obscured or neglected. Niebuhr and Pauck strongly stressed the doctrine of divine sovereignty, while Miller focused upon human sin and human dependence. It was also evident that the volume had a "Niebuhrian" rather than a "Barthian" flavor. While they declared the church's independence from corrupt culture, the contributors did not propose a Barthian distinction between the temporal and the eternal. Indeed, the church's withdrawal was viewed as a means by which the culture might receive the message of social salvation. The church was to be a seasoning agent for social regeneration. With its social and ethical focus, the volume was a prime example of the Niebuhrian strain of neo-orthodoxy.

The liberal reaction to The Church Against the World revealed that the neo-orthodox critique was being taken seriously during the mid-thirties. A large number of long and appreciative reviews indicated that the new movement was being absorbed into the mainstream of American theology. It is significant, however, that while most reviewers of the volume accepted its devastating indictment of the church's compromise with modern culture, few were convinced by its theological remedy. Winfred E. Garrison of the

Christian Century admitted that the book constituted "a slashing critique" of the modern church, but he felt that its constructive arguments were poorly advocated. The contributors supplied no fresh suggestions about how one might find God or be found by God. While the essays made strong metaphysical affirmations, they offered no theory of knowledge by which these affirmations could be verified. Garrison concluded that the authors had sounded "a trumpet call to nothing in particular."[104] Willard Sperry applauded the effort to divorce church from culture, but lamented the fact that the three writers seemed uncertain about how to invoke such a process.[105] In a similar manner, Edwin Ewart Aubrey noted that this protest against cultural alliance had been stated with "commanding power." He feared, however, that the "clear positive implications" of such a protest had not been worked out.[106] And Lynn Harold Hough, who was moved to call the symposium an "extraordinary book" and "a ringing message to the Christian church," concluded that its principal significance lay in its diagnosis rather than its prescription.[107]

While these "tracts for the times"[108] elicited little sharp criticism, religious liberals were obviously uncomfortable with the book's theological perspectives. Like the other neo-orthodox treatises which were written during the early thirties, this one was valued more as a critique of liberalism than as the positive statement of an alternative theology. Despite the publication of ringing manifestoes, most liberals were extremely reluctant to climb aboard the neo-orthodox bandwagon.[109]

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[104] Winfred E. Garrison, "A Declaration of Independence," The Christian Century, 52 (Nov. 13, 1935), pp. 1457-58.

[105] Willard L. Sperry, "The Babylonish Captivity of American Protestantism," Christendom, 1 (Winter, 1936), pp. 367-70.

[106] Edwin Ewart Aubrey, review of The Church Against the World, Religious Education, 31 (April, 1936), p. 148.

[107] Lynn Harold Hough, "The Church and the World," The Drew Gateway, 7 (Oct., 1935), pp. 7-8. Writing from an obvious Barthian perspective, Elmer G. Homrighausen commended the volume but, like the liberal reviewers, observed that there was room for another book with more "positive punch." Homrighausen, review of The Church Against the World, Religion in Life, 5 (Winter, 1936), p. 155.

[108] Sperry, "Babylonish Captivity," p. 367.

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[109] A number of liberals published books during the early thirties which were written in the neo-orthodox mood. Two books by Henry P. Van Dusen, The Plain Man Seeks for God (1933) and God in These Times (1935) elaborated a number of neo-orthodox motifs. While Van Dusen never broke with liberalism, for a time he was tuned into the neo-orthodox wave-length. Robert Lowry Calhoun's God and the Common Life (1935) and John C. Bennett's Social Salvation (1935) were other examples of books which reflected the neo-orthodox mood. Bennett and Calhoun never abandoned their basic liberal perspectives, however, despite the chastening influence of neo-orthodoxy.

CHAPTER VI

FROM LIBERALISM TO NEO-ORTHODOXY: A SUMMARY ANALYSIS

During the Fall of 1938, the Christian Century asked thirty-four prominent churchmen and theologians to contribute to a projected series of autobiographical articles which would explore changes in religious thought during the previous decade. A covering letter which editor Charles Clayton Morrison sent to the prospective contributors indicated why the liberal weekly had decided to undertake such an ambitious project. "We believe," Morrison wrote,

> that there has been coming, in the past decade, a radical and significant change in the thinking of Christian scholarship and leadership. For many this change is in process; for others it may have reached the point of mature conviction. But all of us are aware that ours is a period of intensive and profound transition.

This decade of intellectual transformation had naturally resulted in much bewilderment in the churches. Many American Christians were "walking as if in a kind of mist." It was a propitious time, then, for "the free exchange of experiences, a kind of testimony meeting, in which our leaders may frankly tell of the change (if any) that has come in their own thought."[1]

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[1] Quoted from a copy of the original letter (dated October 3, 1938) which Morrison sent to the prospective contributors. It was published upon completion of the series. See Morrison, "How Their Minds Have Changed," The Christian Century, 56 (Oct. 4, 1939), p. 1194. Morrison had high expectations for the series. Those who received the letter were urged to participate because it promised to be "the most intriguing as well as the most fruitful expression of religious thought which has appeared in the history of The Christian Century." Ibid.

Morrison must have been elated by the response to his letter. The invitation elicited a barrage of revealing autobiographical statements from some of the most significant leaders of the contemporary church.[2] Furthermore, the response substantiated Morrison's contention that a profound transition had taken place in American religious thought during the late twenties and early thirties. The proof was in his own pudding. Upon completion of the "How My Mind Has Changed" series, which ran throughout 1939, Morrison calculated that as many as twenty-six of the thirty-four contributors had experienced at least a "considerable change" in their thinking, while as many as eleven of the respondents had experienced a "radical change."[3]

Morrison summarized the series with an acute assessment of the theological mind-changes which had occurred during the previous decade. He observed that there had been a perceptible shift away from liberal perspectives:

> The liberalism which had been for nearly a half-century the common presupposition of Christian scholarship had been for the first time effectively challenged in this

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[2] The fascinating group of thirty-four contributors was dominated by American religious liberals and former liberals. It included one full-blooded conservative, Clarence Edward Macartney, minister of the First Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, and one simon-pure Barthian, Karl Barth, the only non-American. Barth concluded the series with a banner two-part article. See Karl Barth, "How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade," The Christian Century, 56 (Sept. 13 and 20, 1939), pp. 1097-99, 1132-34.

[3] Morrison, "How Their Minds Have Changed" (Oct. 4, 11, 18, 25 and Nov. 1, 1939), pp. 1194-98, 1237-40, 1271-75, 1300-1303, 1332-35. Morrison divided the contributors into four basic categories or groupings. The first group included those who testified to "no appreciable change," the second, those who had undergone "considerable though not specially transforming change," the third, those who experienced a change which was "substantial and positive," and the fourth, those who testified to "a radical change." (p. 1195).

> decade. . . .It was in this decade that the optimism which had been associated with the doctrine of evolution was challenged as superficial and unwarranted. A halt had been called to the progressive capitulation of theology to the categories and presuppositions of science. The culture of Western civilization was under fire as based upon a philosophy which was now declared false.

Morrison noted that this critique of liberalism had emerged in the first decade after the World War, and was initially regarded as "mere sporadic signs of reaction due to European chaos and despair." It was in the second post-war decade, however, when "hitherto dominant liberalism" had been put on the defensive by "a highly sophisticated attack on the foundations of liberal theology." America had just moved through a crucial decade in its religious development. Liberalism had waned, Morrison concluded, while "a whole new theological outlook had emerged."[4]

The "testimony meeting," sponsored by the Christian Century in 1939, was a sensitive barometer of the change in America's religious climate during the late twenties and early thirties. It provides, therefore, an invaluable documentary framework for a concluding analysis of the shift from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy. Relying primarily upon that series of autobiographical statements, this chapter will examine the nature of the theological transition as well as the factors which prompted the transition. In other words, the chapter will focus upon two fundamental questions---how minds changed and why minds changed during the second post-war decade.

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[4] Morrison, "How Their Minds Have Changed," p. 1194.

Chastened Liberals

The 1939 series provided ample evidence that American religious liberalism had been chastened during the late twenties and early thirties. The spirit of optimism and idealism which had buttressed liberal theology throughout the previous half-century seemed to have evaporated. Responding in an age of crisis and despair, the liberal contributors revealed that, in their quest for more realistic thought-forms, they had moved in the direction of Christian orthodoxy and traditionalism.

The liberal doctrine of man experienced a significant transformation during the second post-war decade. Walter Russell Bowie, a long-time pastor in New York City, recalled the easy optimism which had prevailed in the churches during the early twenties. The idea of evolutionary progress had rendered inevitable the onward and upward movement of humanity. But a decade of disaster had revealed to Bowie and his fellow liberals "the darker side of human destiny." They had come to recognize "the hollowness of the kind of humanistic optimism" in which an earlier generation seemed to trust. "We have all seen the tragic mockery of our formerly exaggerated estimate of man."[5] Theologian John C. Bennett also confessed to a shift "from a rather naive optimism about man and his possibilities in this world to a sober and chastened view of the human problem." A Pelagian at heart, Bennett admitted that the strain of Christian thought represented by Paul and Augustine had recently come alive for him. He defined his new position as "moral realism," because it recognized that man, although created in the image of God, had become "corrupted by pride and self-centeredness." Therefore, sin was "a universal and permanent factor in human life." As a moral realist, Bennett had become "more skeptical concerning particular social programs and panaceas." There was no place for the "much-hammered 'utopianism'" which seemed so reasonable ten years before. A new awareness of sin had convinced Bennett that no social reform was safe against backsliding, and that "every social order must be kept under constant criticism in the light of the Christian ideal which transcends all human moral achievement."[6]

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[5] Walter Russell Bowie, "The Changed Atmosphere," The Christian Century, 56 (July 19, 1939), p. 897.

The liberal conception of God also underwent a major overhaul during the late twenties and early thirties. A large number of religious leaders testified to a revitalized theism. Halford E. Luccock, a professor of preaching at the Yale Divinity School, observed that "the major religious trend" of the previous decade had been "the recovered emphasis on a God-centered faith"---a trend in which he had participated.[7] Another liberal who altered his perception of God was Ernest Fremont Tittle, a Methodist minister in Evanston, Illinois. Tittle admitted that he had shifted from moralistic to theistic preaching during the previous decade, suspecting that his early sermons had left his congregation "religiously unfed" during times of crisis. Imbued with "a new sense of the reality of God," Tittle recognized that "preaching must be God-centered if it is to carry conviction, stir conscience, afford guidance, sustain morale, and offer an enduring ground for hope of a better world."[8] Willard L. Sperry, Dean of the

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[6] John C. Bennett, "A Changed Liberal---But Still a Liberal," The Christian Century, 56 (Feb. 8, 1939), p. 180.

[7] Halford E. Luccock, "With No Apologies to Barth," The Christian Century, 56 (Aug. 9, 1939), p. 971.

[8] Ernest Fremont Tittle, "A God-Centered Ministry," The Christian Century, 56 (June 21, 1939), p. 795.

Harvard Divinity School, also testified to a new conviction about God. "God is more in mind, more real, than he was to me when I first became a minister."[9]

Another persistent trait of the religious transformation of the second post-war decade was a revitalized concern for a distinctive and self-sufficient Christian theology. Liberal spokesmen admitted that they possessed a renewed appetite for the theological enterprise. Robert L. Calhoun, a historical theologian at Yale, wrote that his thought had "moved from a primarily philosophic toward a more definitely theological orientation." Whereas ten years before, Calhoun would have viewed theology as "a more specialized kind of religious philosophy," in 1939 he was convinced that it was a discipline in its own right.[10] Bennett admitted that a new perception of the traditional Christian doctrine of man had "rekindled an interest in theology"---an interest which had nearly been swamped by his interest in ethics.[11] This renewed concern for theology was accompanied by a desire to extricate it from the corruptions of secular thought. In his survey of contemporary religious developments, Luccock explained that there had been an important "shift from a faith which was largely an appendage to the culture of its time, intellectual and economic, to a faith more solidly on its own feet, standing to confront the world with revelation." The typical Christian outlook of the twenties indulged in the secularism of its day. "Ten years of thought and experience," Luccock explained, "have made for the recovery of a more definitely Christian faith."[12]

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[9] Willard L. Sperry, "How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade," The Christian Century, 56 (Jan. 18, 1939), p. 84. This was the first article in the series.

[10] Robert L. Calhoun, "A Liberal Bandaged but Unbowed," The Christian Century, 56 (May 31, 1939), p. 703.

[11] Bennett, "A Changed Liberal---But Still a Liberal," p. 180.

These autobiographical statements might be taken as meaning there was a massive shift from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy during the late twenties and early thirties. Such a conclusion, however, is unwarranted. While American religious liberals moved in the direction of a new form of orthodoxy, they generally did not abandon the fundamental perspectives of liberal theology. Most liberals were chastened during this critical period, but few were converted to neo-orthodoxy. Chastened liberals emerged from the second post-war decade with renewed appreciation for the limitations of man, for the reality of God, and for the independence of Christian theology, but they did not assimilate the radically reconstructed presumptions of early American neo-orthodoxy---God as transcendent, man as sinner and the church against the world.

Most of the contributors to the "testimony meeting" of 1939 vigorously spurned the notion that they were anything but bona fide liberals---despite confessions of theological change. Georgia Harkness, a professor at Garrett Biblical Institute, acknowledged that her thought had been "chastened and deepened" during the previous decade, but she still remained loyal to liberalism. "Ten years ago I was a liberal in theology," she declared. "I am still a liberal, unrepentant and unashamed."[13] Halford Luccock admitted that his understanding of the Christian faith had "deepened and intensified" since the late twenties, but contended that his central convictions remained unshaken. "This leaves me out on a limb as an unrepentant liberal, a position badly exposed to the strong winds of crisis theology and apocalypticism. But up to date I am still hanging on."[14] Despite evidence of significant intellectual change, Calhoun described himself as a liberal, "bandaged but unbowed."[15] While conceding that important shifts of emphasis had occurred in his thinking during the preceding decade, Bennett proclaimed that he was still an adherent to the liberal system of theology. He objected to most of the "tirades" which were being directed against theological liberalism. "We cannot afford to depart far from the spirit and the method of liberalism," Bennett wrote. As for the conclusions of the liberals ten years before, "they must be modified, but not entirely rejected." Like most of his colleagues, Bennett was "a changed liberal---but still a liberal."[16]

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[12] Luccock, "With No Apologies to Barth," p. 971.

[13] Georgia Harkness, "A Spiritual Pilgrimage," The Christian Century, 56 (March 15, 1939), p. 349.

Converted Liberals

Four of the formulators of early American neo-orthodoxy contributed autobiographical articles to the "testimony meeting" of 1939.[17] Edwin

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[14] Luccock, "With No Apologies to Barth," p. 971.

[15] Calhoun, "A Liberal Bandaged but Unbowed," p. 703.

[16] Bennett, "A Changed Liberal---But Still a Liberal," p. 179.

[17] John Alexander Mackay, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, was certainly one of the leaders of American neo-orthodoxy in 1939 when he participated in the mind-change series. During the late twenties and early thirties, however, he had been a missionary in South America and contributed only obliquely to the emergence of the movement. Mackay's thought was very much influenced by Unamuno, Berdyaev, Kierkegaard, Dostoevski and Barth. See Mackay, "On the Road," The Christian Century, 56 (July 12, 1939), pp. 873-75; The Other Spanish Christ: A Study in the Spiritual History of Spain and South America, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1932; and "The Restoration of Theology," Religion in Life, 6 (Spring, 1937), pp. 163-79.

Lewis, Elmer G. Homrighausen, Walter Marshall Horton and Reinhold Niebuhr were among those participants in the Christian Century series who confessed that their minds had changed during the previous decade. The nature of their intellectual change, however, was much more decisive and radical than that of the other contributors. These men were not merely chastened liberals, they were converted liberals converted to neo-orthodoxy.

There was a definite "conversion factor"[18] in the emergence of neo-orthodoxy. The biographical sketches which have appeared throughout the previous chapters have demonstrated that the nascent movement was initiated by bona fide former liberals. Their liberal stripes had been well-earned. They received their theological training from some of the most prominent liberals in America. Their early books, articles and sermons generally reflected the dominant liberal perspectives. Lewis, Horton and the Niebuhr brothers were even considered to be the rising young stars of the liberal movement.

The conversion process was gradual. The proponents of American neo-orthodoxy had participated in the internal critique of religious liberalism which became so decisive during the late twenties. What began as a self-critical protest, however, blossomed into a full-fledged schism during the early thirties as these disaffected liberals adopted theological motifs which, in many important respects, were antithetical to those of liberalism.

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[18] The term "conversion" is not meant to convey a traditional religious conversion experience---with its spiritual, emotional and psychological ramifications. The men under examination were all convinced and dedicated Christians before they "converted" to neo-orthodoxy. Here "conversion" simply refers to a theological change of mind. The term has been employed because it helps to dramatize the difference between the liberals who were merely chastened and those who were radically changed.

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What distinguished the converted liberals from the chastened liberals, then, was not the direction of theological change but the degree or quality of that change. Those liberals who adopted neo-orthodoxy not only re-emphasized human frailties; they perceived man as inherently sinful and society as inherently unredeemable. They not only embraced a vibrant theism; they defined God as transcendent and sovereign. They not only warned the church against cultural capitulation; they set the church over against the world.

The autobiographical articles that the leaders of American neo-orthodoxy submitted to the "testimony meeting" contain fascinating revelations of radical[19] mind-change. Reinhold Niebuhr, described by Morrison as the "most vital personal force in American theology,"[20] confessed that he had undergone "a fairly complete conversion of thought which involved rejection of almost all the liberal theological ideals and ideas" which had dominated his early career.[21] Comparing his "radical conversion" in religious thought to St. Paul's dramatic experience on the road to Damascus, Elmer G. Homrighausen professed that the discovery of dialectical theology had brought about "a destruction, or transmutation" of his liberal perspective.[22] Walter Marshall Horton indicated that when he wrote Realistic Theology in 1934, he was not really conscious of a sharp break with his past, only an ever-growing appreciation of the realistic trend in religious thought. "But beneath this peaceful evolutionary development," he noted, "there was evidently the groundswell of a more revolutionary unconscious change." Indeed, as Horton reflected upon his theological development during the thirties, he confessed that, for a time, he had moved to the theological right---"even to the verge of orthodoxy."[23] The most dramatic theological conversion was documented by Edwin Lewis. Noting that he discovered the Bible while editing The Abingdon Commentary during the late twenties, Lewis confessed that it was an experience which revolutionized his thinking. Thereafter, he perceived with "devastating clarity" that divine revelation rather than speculative philosophy must provide the foundation of Christian theology.[24]

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[19] Morrison placed each of the participating neo-orthodox thinkers into his "radical change" group. See, "How Their Minds Have Changed," pp. 1300, 1332.

[20] Ibid., p. 1302.

[21] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years That Shook My World," The Christian Century, 56 (April 26, 1939), p. 542.

[22] Homrighausen, "Calm After Storm," The Christian Century, 56 (April 12, 1939), pp. 477-78.

The leaders of the neo-orthodox movement who did not participate in the "testimony meeting" of 1939 experienced similar intellectual conversions. In a later version of the original mind-change series, H. Richard Niebuhr admitted that while he preferred to think that his theological development had been continuous and consistent, a purely objective critic would find reason to believe that he changed his mind "in fairly radical fashion" during the early thirties. Niebuhr agreed that during this period he gave up his connection with "that ethics- and religion-centered way of thinking about God and man which is roughly called liberal," and affiliated himself with the movement known as neo-orthodoxy.[25] While the early writings of Walter Lowrie were permeated with the theological perspectives of "German Liberalism," he abandoned liberalism during the late twenties and became a champion of the Barthian strain of neo-orthodoxy.[26] The radical mind-change of George W. Richards was decisively delineated in a review of his Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism (1934), written by Theodore F. Herman, a friend and colleague at Lancaster. Herman remembered that ten years before, Richards had published a liberal manifesto (Christian Ways of Salvation), wrapped in "the fragrant flowers of faith, hope and love," which had "established the author's position among the leaders of progressive protestant thought." Beyond Fundamentalism, however, was a wholly different book. Readers would find evidence of Richards' "counter-conversion," his rejection of liberalism and his adoption of a new form of orthodoxy.[27] Although there is little evidence that Wilhelm Pauck experienced a radical intellectual conversion, it is fair to assume that he moved from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy during the early twenties while studying church history in Germany. Marion Hausner Pauck has related that her husband even switched universities in order to secure a more orthodox counter-perspective to the thought of his liberal mentors, Harnack and Troeltsch.[28]

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[23] Horton, "Between Liberalism and the New Orthodoxy," The Christian Century, 56 (May 17, 1939), pp. 637-38.

[24] Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," The Christian Century, 56 (June 14, 1939), p. 763. Lewis' conversion to neo-orthodoxy gained such a reputation that it came to be identified as a "second conversion." This portrait of the Drew professor became so prevalent that one of his students, Carl Michalson, felt compelled to write that Lewis had experienced only one true conversion---under the ministry of his Sunday School teacher in England at the age of nineteen. See Michalson, "The Edwin Lewis Myth," pp. 217-19.

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[25] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," The Christian Century, 77 (March 2, 1960), p. 248. Niebuhr further indicated that his "fundamental religious convictions and theological orientations" developed between 1930 and 1935. (p. 249). For further elaboration on Niebuhr's mind-change during the period, see James W. Fowler, "The Development and Expression of 'the Conviction of the Sovereignty of God' in H. Richard Niebuhr's Thought."

[26] See Lowrie, "Autobiographical Sketch," Vol. II, Lowrie Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University (undated manuscript), p. 189. Sydney Ahlstrom has noted: "Liberal theology had saved him (Lowrie), like so many others, from skepticism; but the introduction to his translation of Schweitzer's Mystery of the Kingdom of God (1925) marks a transition that gradually deepened into a fullscale revolt as he began to contact the dialectical theologians and to immerse himself in the German translations of Kierkegaard." (Religious History, p. 938). Ahlstrom's observations are essentially correct, but the introduction to the translation of Schweitzer was written from Rome in 1913 and not in 1925 when the book was published. While he appreciated Schweitzer's critique of liberalism, Lowrie did not abandon his irenic liberal perspectives until the mid-twenties when he encountered Barth and Kierkegaard. See Lowrie, "By Faith Alone," Thought, 28 (Summer, 1953), p. 250.

Why Minds Changed: The External Dynamic

The theological transformation of the second post-war decade was stimulated by two basic factors---an "external dynamic" and an "internal dynamic." The external dynamic refers to the critical events and ideas which had a sobering impact upon religious liberalism during this age of crisis. Never operating in a cultural vacuum, liberal theologians were decisively affected by external forces---social, political and economic. The internal dynamic, on the other hand, denotes the particular developments within American religious liberalism which encouraged the rise of neo-orthodoxy. In many important respects, the theological *bouleversement* can be attributed to an internal critique, a self-adjustment of liberal thought.

In his perceptive contribution to the "testimony meeting" of 1939, John C. Bennett observed that the most important factor in his own mind-change had been "the general course of events" which seemed to lead to nothing but "tragic frustrations and dilemmas."[29] Bennett's confession of cultural despair was echoed throughout the series by a large number of chastened but unconverted liberals. A series of disheartening events certainly contributed to the end of their theological innocence.

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[27] Herman, review of Richards' *Beyond Fundamentalism and Modernism*, pp. 39-42.

[28] Marion Hausner Pauck, "Wilhelm Pauck: A Biographical Essay," pp. 338-45.

The debacle of the First World War had a latent but, nonetheless, potent impact upon liberal thought. Willard Sperry believed that the terrible conflict forced his generation to make radical readjustments in its perception of reality. "The peace and progress which we took for granted," wrote Sperry, "have proved not to be guaranteed facts of nature and history."[30]

If the war struck the initial blow for realism, the economic collapse during the early thirties delivered the *coup de grâce*. More than any other crisis event, the Great Depression facilitated a shift away from moralistic liberalism. Robert L. Calhoun remembered that before the Wall Street Crash of 1929, he regarded economic morality chiefly as a matter of "individual honesty and good will. *Mea culpa*." Three years of mounting disillusionment and anxiety, however, cured the young theologian of that "particular blindness." After reading Keynes, Veblen, Marx, Lenin and "various lesser image-smashers," Calhoun began to comprehend the "concrete relation between ethics and economics."[31] John C. Schroeder of the Yale Divinity School admitted that his confidence in the liberal social gospel had been deflated by the depression. This devastating crisis had convinced him that the palliative remedies of liberal economic reformers were basically ineffective.

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[29] Bennett, "A Changed Liberal---But Still a Liberal," p. 179.

[30] Sperry, "How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade," p. 82.

[31] Calhoun, "A Liberal Bandaged but Unbowed," pp. 702-703.

Searching for a deeper social gospel, Schroeder concluded that "all the good human efforts to make life more Christian or at least more decent seem like candles in a hurricane."[32]

While the economic disaster was the major source of disillusionment, other events helped to sober religious liberals. For instance, the emergence of nationalism, totalitarianism and communism distressed many of the liberal participants in the mind-change series.[33] Long-cherished hopes for international peace and worldwide democracy had been dashed by the violent and repressive regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin and Stalin. These post-war tragedies severely undermined the liberal doctrines of cultural immanence and progressive evolution.

While Bennett indicated that "the general course of events" had chastened his liberal perspectives, he added that these events, "apart from definite intellectual influences," would probably not have caused a very significant mind-change.[34] The actual events of the post-war era were accompanied by critical new modes of thought.

The most dynamic theological force during the late twenties and early thirties was the European theology of crisis. This fact was dramatically underscored by the "How My Mind Has Changed" series. Remarkably, thirty-two of the thirty-four contributors took note of the Barthian movement in their testimony articles.

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[32] John C. Schroeder, "A Deeper Social Gospel," The Christian Century, 56 (July 26, 1939), p. 923.

[33] A. J. Muste, Director of the Presbyterian Labor Temple in New York City, was thoroughly disillusioned by political events in Russia, Germany and Italy. See Muste, "The True International," The Christian Century, 56 (May 24, 1939), pp. 667-69. With many others, Albert W. Palmer, President of Chicago Theological Seminary, expressed dismay over burgeoning nationalism. See Palmer, "A Decade's Spiritual Pilgrimage," The Christian Century, 56 (June 7, 1939), pp. 730-32.

[34] Bennett, "A Changed Liberal---But Still a Liberal," p. 179.

A number of chastened liberals maintained a relatively mild "no. . . but" attitude vis-à-vis crisis theology. Bennett, for instance, admitted that there was "much corrective value" in the Barthian emphasis on Biblical revelation and Reformation thought. It was probably "necessary dynamite." Nevertheless, Bennett concluded that he was "more repelled than helped by the Barthian form of traditionalism."[35] In the same vein, Frederick D. Kershner, of Butler University, indicated that he had been both provoked and fascinated by Karl Barth. Some of Barth's writings had "the note of authentic prophecy;" others were nothing but "exaggerated piffle."[36]

The vast majority of liberals, however, were less equivocal in their rejection of Barthianism. Walter Russell Bowie emphatically dissociated himself from the movement and its radical doctrine of divine transcendence. "It would be an evil day for theology," asserted Bowie, if liberalism were denounced and succeeded by a system which supposes that "we know most about God in proportion as we make him inhuman and unintelligible."[37] Halford Luccock, an unrepentant liberal, also vigorously rejected Barth's conception of a wholly other God. According to Luccock, it was a strange paradox that Barth's "extreme exaltation of God" had "the practical effect of atheism."[38] Despite the impressive credentials of Barthian theology, then,

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[35] Ibid., pp. 179-80.

[36] Frederick D. Kershner, "Realities and Visions," The Christian Century, 56 (Feb. 1, 1939), p. 149.

[37] Bowie, "The Changed Atmosphere," p. 897.

[38] Luccock, "With No Apologies to Barth," p. 973.

American religious liberals were wary of adopting its radical perspectives. By 1939 it was apparent that while the liberal community had heeded Wilhelm Pauck's plea that Karl Barth be heard, they did not like what they were hearing. Barthianism had a chastening influence upon liberal theologians, but as a positive restatement it was almost totally repudiated.

The same external influences which chastened the faith of unrepentant liberals had a more decisive impact, as one might expect, upon those liberals who converted to neo-orthodoxy. There is little doubt that such conversions were facilitated by the "great negative instances"[39] of contemporary Western culture.

Reinhold Niebuhr indicated in 1928 that the war had made him "a child of the age of disillusionment." When the war began, he had been an almost sentimental optimist; when it ended, he had become an almost cynical realist.[40] In spite of this typical Niebuhrian overstatement, the war was even more crucial in the intellectual development of Wilhelm Pauck. Unlike the other proponents of American neo-orthodoxy, Pauck experienced the bitter realities of the conflict firsthand as a German teenager. He reflected in 1939 that the war had conditioned his emerging world-view.

> When I became aware of the world about me, it was full of victories and defeats in battle, of men in uniform and women in mourning clothes, of wounded men in the streets, and of prisoners at work in the fields and on

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[39] In his 1931 Yale Alumni Lecture, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," H. Richard Niebuhr noted that the "actual failures of civilization, the experience of great negative instances" had triggered the contemporary mood of despair and disillusionment. (p. 9).

[40] Reinhold Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," p. 1161. See Chapter I of this dissertation.

> the highways. The joys of my boyhood were intermingled with the pains of hunger and hampered by the worries of my mother who, while my father was somewhere in Poland behind the Russian front, often did not know how to feed us rationed meals and how to keep us in clothing.

Pauck remembered the period of reconstruction following the armistice as "a turmoil much more upsetting than that of the war years." It was a despairing time of revolution, strikes, street-fighting, political putschs and runaway inflation. "Surrounded by the ruins of civilization heaped up by the World War," Pauck's generation of Germans was infected with a poignant sense of disillusionment and hopelessness. "The future of mankind appeared so dark that all hope for the preservation of culture and a creative life seemed to be taken from individual men."[41] Undoubtedly, Pauck's flirtation with European crisis theology and his adoption of American neo-orthodoxy were at least partial by-products of his initial response to the cataclysm of the war.

As for the depression's impact upon the "converts," H. Richard Niebuhr likened it to the shock of "a great earthquake" upon a modern city.[42] The catastrophic events of the early thirties certainly struck Elmer G. Homrighausen with devastating force. An impressionable young pastor in Indianapolis during the most severe stages of the depression, he was profoundly affected by its impact upon the daily lives of his parishioners. Homrighausen remembers that for a period he was debilitated by a seige of "tremendous personal despair." Only through the understanding aid of some of the elders of his congregation was he able to break out of this state of mental depression and resume the full burden of his ministry.[43] Homrighausen's travels to Europe only exacerbated his sense of disillusionment. Following his visit there in 1934, he declared that Western civilization was gravely ill---"everywhere one travels today one feels the heightened pulse-beat and the fever." The old liberalism was being repudiated; democracy was deemed too slow and inefficient; capitalism was hated; bourgeois life was spurned; and intolerable social conditions were stirring a revolt. It was little wonder, wrote Homrighausen, that men were talking about "the beginning of a whole new mythos of civilization."[44] In response to this cultural crisis, the Indianapolis pastor adopted a theological realism and a social radicalism. During the same time in which he was promulgating a Barthian strain of neo-orthodoxy, he remembers being "branded Communist" because of his radical social pronouncements. Both aspects of his conversion experience were certainly stimulated by the flow of events during the early thirties. Homrighausen savors those years as the "most interesting, revolutionary, and creative" of his entire career.[45]

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[41] Pauck, "Theological Education as I See It," pp. 1-5.

[42] H. Richard Niebuhr, Sermon delivered at Marquand Chapel, Yale, Jan. 4, 1934, pp. 1-3. Unpublished paper in possession of Mrs. H. Richard Niebuhr and Richard R. Niebuhr. Cited by their permission.

The article which Walter Marshall Horton contributed to the mind-change series in 1939 reflects how thoroughly the proponents of neo-orthodoxy had been disillusioned by the negative events of the preceding decade. Horton wrote that the "multiplying social catastrophes" of the late twenties and early thirties had convinced him that drastic proposals were needed to amend the status quo. "The disease of modern civilization" had revealed itself as "a deadly illness, which superficial remedies can only augment like a mustard plaster on the chest of a man suffering from angina." Discouraged by the palliative remedies of liberal ethics, Horton touted a realistic faith which could face inescapable earthly disasters with eschatological calm. "Like some of my premillenarian friends," concluded Horton, "I face the new decade with hope, not because I see things getting better, but because I see things getting worse. For at every ultimate crisis evil collapses, and God raises up crucified truth and goodness."[46]

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[43] Homrighausen, Interview with Dennis N. Voskuil, June 8, 1972.

[44] Homrighausen, "My World and My Task," The Reformed Church Messenger, 107 (Sept. 27, 1934), p. 2.

[45] Homrighausen, Letter to Dennis N. Voskuil, postmarked Nov. 14, 1972.

Like the "great negative instances," Continental crisis theology obviously had a more powerful impact upon the converted liberals than upon the chastened liberals. Edwin Lewis, for instance, has acknowledged that his Christian Manifesto was due, "in no small measure," to a study of Karl Barth. The Swiss theologian had given Lewis the courage "to throw off the shackles of mere contemporaneity" and to keep his mind "exposed" to the Bible.[47] George Richards, Walter Lowrie and Elmer Homrighausen owed similar debts to the theology of crisis. In the "testimony meeting" of 1939, Homrighausen recaptured much of the excitement of his initial encounter with Barthian thought:

> It laid bare the problems of the day in church and society with brutal frankness. It offered me, the critic, no quarter. It made the old truths throb with new vitality. It crowded me into individual and existential decision.

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[46] Horton, "Between Liberalism and the New Orthodoxy," pp. 639-40.

[47] Lewis, "How Barth Has Influenced Me," pp. 358-59.

> It made God inescapable and real! Its criticisms of the church, of society, of liberalism, of a false orthodoxy, were honest and refreshing. This theology had something. It had prophetic fire. And the more I read my New Testament, the more it seemed to me that its religion was of that youthful and historic sort. This new theology was converted! It had a passion.[48]

The influence of European crisis theology was not restricted to the Barthian-oriented formulators of American neo-orthodoxy. Proponents of the Niebuhrian strain have paid high tributes to Karl Barth. Despite his well-publicized disparagement of Barth's social ethics, Reinhold Niebuhr has acknowledged that, in many important respects, he was the spiritual son of this giant rebel against religious liberalism.[49] H. Richard Niebuhr admitted that Barth, one of his two "teachers," played a vital role in his theological transformation during the early thirties.[50] Walter Marshall Horton has testified that his *Realistic Theology* was positively influenced by Barth's indictment of culture-bound liberal theology.[51] And even Wilhelm Pauck, who could not decide whether he was for or against Karl Barth, obviously absorbed many of the important elements of the Barthian critique.[52]

While the converts to American neo-orthodoxy were profoundly influenced by the crisis theology, they maintained a "yes. . .but" attitude with respect to the European movement. Walter Marshall Horton, for instance, believed that Barth was at once "a great prophet and a great heretic." As a prophet he had brought theology back to the word of God from the word of man; as a heretic he had "made war on natural theology and natural religion to the point of irrationalism."[53] Edwin Lewis vigorously rebutted the seemingly common supposition that he had "gone Barthian." While admitting that he was sympathetic to this "truly great soul," Lewis claimed that he could never accept Barth's views of revelation nor "his virtual rejection of philosophy as a proper ally of theological structure."[54] Despite Walter Lowrie's obvious romance with crisis theology during the late twenties and early thirties, he would later declare somewhat superciliously that Barth's thought was "on the thin side."[55] And even Elmer Homrighausen, perhaps this country's most enthusiastic early supporter of Barth, noted his eventual detachment from European crisis theology during the thirties. "My American nature," he wrote in 1939, "began to assert its independence and to say that it was time that the dialectical theology had indigenous interpretation and application." Despite his undeniable veneration for the great prophet from Europe, Homrighausen concluded that "Barth's traditionalism and scholasticism tended toward the antique and the irrelevant."[56]

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[48] Homrighausen, "Calm After Storm," pp. 477-78.

[49] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Quality of Our Lives," *The Christian Century*, *77* (May 11, 1960), p. 570.

[50] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 248-49.

[51] Horton, "How Barth Has Influenced Me," p. 359.

[52] See Pauck, *Karl Barth*, especially the first five chapters; and "Karl Barth Must Be Heard," pp. 493-98.

While Barth was the most persuasive "internal" influence upon the exponents of American neo-orthodoxy, a number of other crisis thinkers contributed to their theological conversion experiences. Emil Brunner, less prone to make radical distinctions between theology and philosophy, had an especially profound impact upon the nascent movement. Edwin Lewis, for instance, found himself "much nearer to Brunner than to Barth."[57] The Niebuhrian strain of neo-orthodoxy was greatly influenced by Paul Tillich. Interested in the socio-historical dimensions of religion, Tillich was especially appealing to H. Richard Niebuhr who translated and introduced _The Religious Situation_ in 1932.[58] Like many Europeans who experienced the bitter realities of World War I, Wilhelm Pauck was, at least for a time, deeply affected by Oswald Spengler's pessimistic interpretation of Western culture, _The Decline of the West_ (1918).[59] Walter Lowrie, of course, was captivated by Sören Kierkegaard, who supplied Barthianism with its crucial proposition---the infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity. By the late thirties, Lowrie's contributions to neo-orthodoxy would be overshadowed by his unending flow of Kierkegaardiana.[60] Among the other European thinkers who helped to stimulate American neo-orthodoxy were the crisis theologians, Eduard Thurneysen, Adolf Keller and Friedrich Gogarten, as well as the realistic writers, Miguel Unamuno, Feodor Dostoevski and Nicolas Berdyaev.

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[53] Horton, "How Barth Has Influenced Me," p. 360.

[54] Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," p. 764; and "How Barth Has Influenced Me," p. 358.

[55] Lowrie, "By Faith Alone," p. 250.

[56] Homrighausen, "Calm After Storm," p. 479.

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[57] Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," p. 764.

[58] See Chapter III of this dissertation.

[59] See Pauck, "Theological Education as I See It," pp. 1-5.

[60] For Lowrie's Kierkegaardiana, see "Bibliography," _Dr. Lowrie of Princeton and Rome_, pp. 236-38.

Why Minds Changed: The Internal Dynamic

External influences played a decisive role in the theological bouleversement of the second post-war decade. As Halford Luccock put it, an interpreter of the period can no more miss the impact of these forces on American religious thought than "one traveling through Switzerland can miss the Alps."[61] The transition from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy, however, was not determined exclusively by external influences. Equally important was the "inner logic" of liberalism, an ongoing process of self-adjustment which laid the groundwork for the neo-orthodox revolt of the early thirties.

American religious liberalism was a dynamic and flexible movement which possessed a remarkable capacity for self-criticism and self-correction. While its prevailing motifs were undeniably idealistic and optimistic, liberalism constantly nurtured a critical strain of moral realism. Even before the sobering impact of the Great War, prophets of realism like William W. Fenn were reminding fellow liberals of the unpleasant realities of human existence. And during the immediate post-war years this realistic critique was diligently pursued by prominent thinkers like Willard L. Sperry and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Under the pressure of this process of self-criticism, liberalism moved steadily toward greater and greater moral realism.[62]

The neo-orthodox revolt, then, was a logical outgrowth of the internal critique which had been previously enunciated by liberal realists. In its nascent form, neo-orthodoxy was merely an extension of this critical impulse within the liberal movement. As self-conscious liberals, the proponents of the new movement assailed the reigning motifs of liberalism, not with the intention of destroying the liberal system, but in the hope that it might be fundamentally reconstructed. Thus, Walter Marshall Horton could maintain in 1939 that when he wrote Realistic Theology, he was "conscious of no sharp break" with his past, only a new mood of resolution that "liberal theology needed to be purged of idealistic illusions, and might better call itself by a new name to indicate that it was making a fresh start."[63]

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[61] Luccock, "With No Apologies to Barth," p. 972.

[62] See Chapter II of this dissertation; and Hutchison, "The Modernist Impulse," pp. 285-341.

While liberalism moved in the direction of moral realism, it did not totally divest itself of idealistic motifs, even under the pressure of an economic depression. Therefore, during the early thirties, the neo-orthodox critique became a rather distinct and identifiable movement, as it adopted theological tenets which were antithetical to those of liberalism: man as sinner, God as transcendent, the Church against the world. The neo-orthodox movement, however, did not completely lose its liberal stamp. Especially with respect to Biblical criticism, the Social Gospel and, to a great extent, the irenic spirit of open inquiry, the new movement always betrayed its liberal heritage. The formulators of neo-orthodoxy consistently acknowledged their debts to liberal thought. For instance, Horton has testified that while he sought to correct its deficiencies, he was equally concerned with preserving "the enduring values in liberal Protestant thought," especially its "critical outlook."[64] Late in his life, Reinhold Niebuhr maintained that it was necessary to preserve some of the values of the liberal tradition such as intellectual freedom, rigorous inquiry and the spirit of tolerance. "When I find neo-orthodoxy turning into sterile orthodoxy or a new Scholasticism," confessed Niebuhr, "I find that I am a liberal at heart, and that many of my broadsides against liberalism were indiscriminate."[65]

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[63] Horton, "Between Liberalism and the New Orthodoxy," pp. 637-38.

[64] Ibid.

The Re-conversion Factor

Considering the fact that neo-orthodoxy developed as an internal critique of religious liberalism, it is fascinating to speculate why a few liberals joined the new movement, while the vast majority remained within the fold. Since they were subject to the same external and internal forces, why were some liberals converted to neo-orthodoxy, while most were simply chastened? This is obviously a very complex question, one which cannot be fully answered without elaborate socio-psychological studies of the chastened liberals as well as the converts to neo-orthodoxy. A number of factors might be involved: temperament, exposure to Barthianism, socio-economic status and degree of commitment to liberalism.

Definitive conclusions about conversions and non-conversions must await further study. It is significant, however, that the mind-changes of the early exponents of American neo-orthodoxy seem to have been "re-conversions." While the leaders of the nascent movement were bona fide liberals before adopting neo-orthodoxy, they were bona fide conservatives before adopting liberalism. In effect, they reappropriated many of the theological motifs of their youth. This "re-conversion factor" demonstrates that a shift to neo-orthodoxy depended, at least in part, upon a certain predisposition toward its theological constructs.

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[65] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Quality of Our Lives," p. 568.

The pre-liberal faith of the important initiators of American neo-orthodoxy was decidedly orthodox. The Niebuhr brothers were "nurtured in the cradle of German-Lutheran piety." They were reared and educated in the Evangelical Synod of North America, a theologically conservative denomination which drew most of its membership from German-speaking Lutherans who had immigrated to the midwestern section of this country. Their father, the first formative religious influence on their lives, was a minister in that small denomination. Reinhold described him as a man of "vital personal piety," who introduced his sons to the thought of Harnack "without fully sharing the liberal convictions of that theologian."[66] George W. Richards was "born in the bosom" of the Reformed Church in the United States, a larger but equally conservative German-dominated denomination. At Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where the denominational seminary was located, he inhaled the confessional orthodoxy of the Mercersberg Theology.[67] Another product of the German Reformed Church, Elmer Homrighausen remembers that his parents were deeply religious and utterly committed to traditionalism. His boyhood faith "was a matter of dread at the thought of God's judgment. . . .The moral law hung like a sword of Damocles over my defenseless head." Even when attending Princeton Seminary in the early twenties, Homrighausen's theology was still "essentially traditional."[68] Walter Marshall Horton was reared in a conservative Baptist environment. Most of his formative years were spent in Arlington, Massachusetts, where he was profoundly affected by the evangelical theology of the minister of the First Baptist Church.[69] Although Walter Lowrie was destined to become an Episcopalian, he was spawned by a famous Presbyterian family. The Lowries had produced a number of Presbyterian missionaries and ministers, including his father. All were traditionalists. Lowrie's childhood faith was reinforced at Princeton Seminary, which during the 1880's was still a bastion of Reformed orthodoxy.[70] Edwin Lewis came to liberalism by way of evangelical British Methodism. "Converted under the ministry of his Sunday School teacher in England," Lewis "bore witness to his conversion" by volunteering to become a missionary to Labrador at the age of nineteen.[71] Among the early proponents of American neo-orthodoxy, only Wilhelm Pauck was not raised in a conservative theological environment. There is little evidence that his family was concerned with theological matters at all. His biographer relates that "while his parents were not hostile to the church, they were not church people, nor was the general spirit of his family determined by the church." Not until Pauck entered the University of Berlin did he endeavor to study theology, and then he encountered a high-powered brand of liberalism, promulgated by Harnack and Troeltsch.[72]

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[66] Ronald H. Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians, p. 17; and Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," p. 3. Both H. Richard and Reinhold attended the denominational schools, Elmhurst College and Eden Theological Seminary. And both served as pastors for churches in the Evangelical Synod of North America.

[67] See Charles E. Schaeffer, "Dr. Richards as a Reformed Churchman," pp. 1-3. The seminary at Lancaster had been previously located at Mercersburg, where Schaff and Nevin promulgated a vibrant confessional theology.

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[68] Homrighausen, Letter to Dennis N. Voskuil, postmarked Nov. 14, 1972; and "Calm After Storm," p. 477.

[69] See Horton, "Rough Sketch of a Half Formed Mind," pp. 161-88.

[70] See Alexander C. Zabriskie, "Like All Gaul: Lowrie's Tripartite Life," in Dr. Lowrie of Princeton and Rome, pp. 1-5.

[71] Carl Michalson, "The Edwin Lewis Myth," p. 218.

For the most part, then, the proponents of early American neo-orthodoxy had been religious conservatives before they came under the influence of liberal theology.[73] Because the shift from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy involved the reappropriation of certain conservative motifs, this process can probably be viewed as a theological "re-conversion." It would be wrong, however, to insist that American neo-orthodoxy was not, as the term implies, a new form of orthodoxy. While it reinstituted a number of orthodox concepts, neo-orthodoxy was definitely a post-liberal phenomenon. Composed of former liberals, the nascent movement both retained many liberal values and allowed liberalism to set the terms of the discussion. It was impossible for these men actually to "go home again" to their adolescent faith. Elmer G. Homrighausen, still an adherent of American neo-orthodoxy in this post-neo-orthodox era, recently commented on the relationship between his old orthodoxy and his new orthodoxy. "I can see how the old tradition in which I was reared is related to the new," Homrighausen has written. "But while the new has come out of the old, the new is indeed new."[74]

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[72] Marion Hausner Pauck, "Wilhelm Pauck: A Biographical Essay," pp. 340-41.

[73] The conservative to liberal shift was not restricted to those theologians who eventually became neo-orthodox. A large proportion of religious liberals came to the New Theology by way of the Old Orthodoxy. For an intriguing set of liberal autobiographies, see Vergilius Ferm, ed., Contemporary American Theology: Theological Autobiographies, 2 vols., New York: Round Table Press, 1932 and 1933.

[74] Homrighausen, Letter to Dennis N. Voskuil, postmarked Nov. 14, 1972.

Transient and Permanent

The early converts to American neo-orthodoxy persistently condemned religious liberalism for its sympathetic alliance with modern culture. Such an alliance was invariably disparaged as evidence of cultural capitulation and loss of theological integrity. Reinhold Niebuhr, for instance, complained in 1939 that liberal Christianity had been so "pathetically eager" to justify itself before the modern mind that it "sacrificed most of the essential Christian positions."[75] Furthermore, neo-orthodox crities attributed the disintegration of the liberal movement to its naive modernism. Walter Marshall Horton maintained in his Realistic Theology that liberalism's endeavor to "modernize" or "liberalize" Christianity had resulted in its eventual dissolution. Having thoroughly assimilated the "presuppositions, prejudices and illusions" of a particular era in history, it was "foredoomed to perish" with the passing of that era. Horton proclaimed that liberalism had fallen beneath the same sentence of doom which it so often pronounced upon older systems of theology: "O irony of ironies, its 'thought-forms' have become 'outmoded'!"[76]

It is ironic, in view of this dire analysis of the liberal movement, that an unrepentant liberal in the thirties pronounced the same sentence of doom upon the neo-orthodox movement. Edward Scribner Ames, a wily Chicago-school liberal, criticized Horton's Realistic Theology because he believed that it constituted little more than an over-reaction to post-war catastrophic events. "The realistic theology," complained Ames,

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[75] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years That Shook My World," p. 544.

[76] Horton, Realistic Theology, p. 5.

"appears as a backwash from the tragedy of the war and a 'failure of nerve' in times of depression." According to Ames, pessimistic neo-orthodoxy was periodized and culture-bound, "a passing episode, salutary in certain of its criticisms and emphases, but yet only an eddy in the mainstream" of American theology.[77]

Ames was certainly perceptive. The theologians who converted to neo-orthodoxy had been disillusioned by social catastrophes, notably the war and the depression. Moreover, the very appeal which Barthianism held for these thinkers was predicated upon the fact that it was a "theology of crisis," born out of the tragedies of the post-war era. Indeed, while the proponents of neo-orthodoxy were castigating the liberals for capitulating to an Age of Optimism, they were themselves formulating a theology for an Age of Crisis. In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, it was "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment."[78]

In a sense, Ames accurately assessed the transitory nature of neo-orthodox theology. Like the liberal movement which preceded it, neo-orthodoxy was so intimately identified with a particular era in history that it was foredoomed to perish with the passing of that era. Following the Second World War, when America entered another period of good hope and optimism, this crisis theology began to disintegrate. As a movement of religious thought, neo-orthodoxy failed to survive the placid decade of the fifties.[79] It proved to be "a passing episode. . .only an eddy in the mainstream."

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[77] Edward Scribner Ames, "The Human Predicament," Christendom, 1 (Oct., 1935), pp. 179-81.

[78] The title of Niebuhr's 1931 Yale Alumni Lecture.

While neo-orthodoxy was, as Ames had predicted, a transitory religious movement, it must also be emphasized that there were many permanent elements in its critique which have survived into the present post-neo-orthodox era. Certainly the neo-orthodox insistence upon radical transcendence informed the Death of God theologies which burgeoned during the mid-sixties. And the pessimistic neo-orthodox understanding of human nature has surely been incorporated into the confusing matrix of contemporary theology. Despite the fact that neo-orthodoxy was a transitory religious movement, it contributed significantly to the advancement of religious thought. As successor to liberalism and as predecessor to present-day theology, neo-orthodoxy constituted an important stage of theological development in America.

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[79] It is extremely difficult to pin-point the passing of neo-orthodoxy in America. Much of its intellectual vitality had evaporated as early as the late forties. Sydney Ahlstrom is probably correct, however, in observing that the movement came to an end during the late fifties. See his Religious History, pp. 961-63. For an interesting assessment of neo-orthodoxy's impact upon present-day theology, see Langdon Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969.

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